

To Form a More Perfect Ring-Composition: Horace, *I. 16.9*

The grand opening of Horace's 16th Iamb (or Epode) is one long sentence (1-14):¹

Altera iam teritur bellis civilibus aetas,
 suis et ipsa Roma viribus ruit.
 quam neque finitimi valuerunt perdere Marsi
 minacis aut Etrusca Porsenae manus,
 aemula nec virtus Capuae nec Spartacus acer 5
 novisque rebus infidelis Allobrox,
 nec fera caerulea domuit Germania pube
 parentibusque abominatus Hannibal,
 impia perdemus devoti sanguinis aetas
 ferisque rursus occupabitur solum: 10
 barbarus heu cineres insistet victor et urbem
 eques sonante verberabit ungula,
 quaeque carent ventis et solibus ossa Quirini,
 (nefas videre) dissipabit insolens.

Two things bother me about line 9:

1. In reciting this poem on my daily walks, I found that I kept misremembering line 9 as a silver line, with the second and third words reversed: *impia devoti perdemus sanguinis aetas*. This made me wonder: why would Horace have preferred the less grand word order of the manuscripts? The clash of s-sounds in *perdemus Sanguinis*? The same clash in lines 12, *equeS Sonante*, doesn't seem to have bothered him. The change of ictus? I would have thought the inevitable coincidence of ictus and accent in the third word of a line of this shape (dactyl-molossus-molossus-dactyl-spondee) would sound better in the main verb *perdémus* than in *devóti*. However, I do not propose to transpose the words, because of a second doubt:

2. The future tense of *perdemus* does not seem as final and irrevocable as I would like. If the fact of destruction is still in the future, along with all the details, it sounds as if there might still be some way to avoid it. We want something that says that the destruction is already certain, though most of the horrific details are still in the future.

Putting these two doubts together, I wonder whether Horace wrote *impia perdidimus devoti sanguinis aetas*. The verb might easily have been shortened to *perdimus* by haplo-

¹ I print the modern vulgate text without an apparatus, since none of the variants affect my argument.

graphy,² and then corrected to remove the metrical fault and match the tense to the verbs in the following context (*occupabitur* 10, *insistet* 11, *verberabit* 12, *dissipabit* 14). A perfect verb would also tighten up the ring-composition in lines 3 and 9,³ bringing us from the foreign and domestic enemies who have not been strong enough to destroy Rome (*valuerunt perdere*, 3) to ourselves, who have done just that (*perdidimus*, 9), and will now (11-14) suffer the results. Finally, this conjecture also solves my first puzzle, since the perfect verb is no longer interchangeable with *devoti*.

² For an exact parallel to what I propose here, several manuscripts (Klingner: ‘*δπρ.*, *sim.* B’) shorten the verb in *C.* 3.5.1, *Caelo tonantem credidimus Iovem*, to *credimus*, wrecking the meter in the process.

³ Mankin, *ad loc.*, provides parallels.