

Juvenal 1.163: an Alternative Solution¹

I quote 1.160-64:

'cum ueniet contra digito compesce labellum: 160
accusator erit qui uerbum dixerit "hic est."
securus licet Aenean Rutulumque ferocem
committas, nulli grauis est percussus Achilles
aut multum quaesitus Hylas urnamque secutus:'

In his contribution to the Festschrift for Otto Skutsch, R. G. M. Nisbet impugns *percussus* (163) as insufficiently witty for its context:²

“The duel between Aeneas and Turnus is described in typically derisive terms, as if the poet were promoting a fight of gladiators, and *urnamque secutus* is an equally frivolous way of describing Hylas’s fall down the well. But when we turn to the middle illustration, there is nothing humorous about *percussus Achilles*; contrast 1.54 (of Icarus), *et mare percussum puero* (sandwiched between the equally facetious *mugitum labyrinthi* and *fabrumque volantem*).”

Nisbet suggests that we alter *percussus* to *excussus*, “frisked” and so “exposed”, alluding to “the hero’s exposure when he was disguised as a girl on Scyros”.³

Although I find Nisbet’s diagnosis entirely persuasive, I think that a different prescription is possible, namely *pertusus*. Given the common confusion of *c* and *t* and of single and double consonants in our manuscripts, this is paleographically even easier than *excussus*. The fact that the participle of *pertundere* was sometimes spelled *pertussus*

¹ My text is taken from E. Courtney, *Juvenal, the Satires: a Text with Brief Critical Notes* (Instrumentum Litterarum 1), Rome, 1984.

² “Notes on the Text and Interpretation of Juvenal”, in Nicholas Horsfall (ed.), *Vir Bonus Discendi Peritus: Studies in Celebration of Otto Skutsch’s Eightieth Birthday* (BICS Supplement 51), London, 1988, 86-110. Our passage is discussed on 88-89. He also proposes altering *uerbum* (161) to *uerbo*, but that is a separate question, and will not be considered here.

³ He also sees a reference to Statius’ *Achilleid*, to match references to Vergil and Valerius Flaccus in the other two exempla. Although agreeing that a reference to Statius would be in order, since “Statius was the outstanding example of the kind of poet that Juvenal deplored”, I do not see that a specific reference to the completed portion of the *Achilleid* is necessary. If Statius had lived long enough, he would surely have treated the death of Achilles in detail in Book XI or XII, and that should suffice to make it a suitably Statian topic.

would have multiplied the opportunities for confusion.⁴ Tibullus 1.10.37-38, part of a description of the Underworld, provides a good parallel for the error, and is instructive in other ways. The early manuscripts, followed by most twentieth-century editors, including K. F. Smith, Phillimore (*OCT*), Lenz-Galinsky, Putnam, and Lee, read:

*illic percussisque genis ustoque capillo
errat ad obscuros pallida turba lacus.*

On the other hand, Pichard, Luck, Murgatroyd, and Goold (in the new Loeb) print *pertusisque* in 37.⁵ As Murgatroyd says, “*Pertusisque* means ‘bored through’, and the ref. is to the eyes devoured by the pyre . . . or by worms after burial”.⁶ Lee defends *percussisque* on the grounds that “the dead are acting like mourners”, as if the dead would be beating their cheeks to mourn their own deaths.⁷ Admittedly, there is a very close parallel, but this would only help Lee’s case if Tibullus were a poet in the same class as A. Phillimore, of whom Martinus Scriblerus writes (*ΠΕΡΙ ΒΑΘΟΥΣ, or, The Art of Sinking in Poetry*, London, 1727, Chapter XI):⁸

“With no less Simplicity does he suppose that Shepherdesses tear their
Hair and beat their Breasts, at their own Deaths:

Ye brighter Maids, faint emblems of my Fair,
With Looks cast down, and with dishevel’d Hair,
In bitter Anguish beat your Breasts, and moan
Her Death untimely, *as it were your own.*”

It is precisely the fact that Juvenal is a satirist and Tibullus is not which obliges us to alter the forms of *percussus* in both passages: the one instance of the verb is insufficiently ludicrous for its context, the other excessively so.

⁴ L. Havet, *Manuel de Critique Verbale Appliqué[e] aux Textes Latins*, Paris, 1911, 218 § 926, lists passages in which our manuscripts either preserve the double-*s* spellings or exhibit corruptions facilitated by them.

⁵ In his Teubner Tibullus (Stuttgart, 1988), G. Luck attributes *pertusisque* to “Lipsius ex codicibus, ut videtur, Livineius ex coniectura”.

⁶ P. Murgatroyd, *A Commentary on the First Book of the Elegies of Albius Tibullus*, Pietermaritzburg, 1980, *ad loc.*

⁷ Guy Lee (ed.), *Tibullus: Elegies* (Liverpool Latin Texts 3), Liverpool, 1982-2, *ad loc.*

⁸ The entire chapter, on “the diminishing figures”, might almost be an instruction-book for writing passages such as Juvenal 1.160-64.

Though not, strictly speaking, unpoetic, *pertundere* is a suitably low word in two different ways. It has a banausic sense “drill” or “perforate”, and is used by Juvenal of a cloak full of holes (*pertusa . . . laena* 5.131), of bloodletting (*o medici, nimiam pertundite uenam* 6.46), and of booklice or similar pests damaging books (*positos tineae pertunde libellos* 7.26).⁹ It may be worth noting that *pertundere* also means “penetrate” in the sexual sense. Although the *OLD* quotes only Catullus’ metaphorical use (32.11) for the sexual meaning, the existence and nature of the goddess *Pertunda* (Varro apud August. *De Civ. D.* 6.9) suffice to show that the word was used that way.¹⁰ Even a hint of this second meaning would provide a suitably unheroic reminder of post-Homeric notions of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus.¹¹ Nisbet’s objection to *percussus* essentially comes down to its tone. Alteration to *pertusus*, rather than *excussus*, allows us to alter the tone without altering the reference. It may be significant that the scholiast, who refers to *Aeneid* 6.57 (*Dardana qui Paridis direxti tela manusque*), takes the passage as referring to the death of Achilles. Nisbet’s presumed error must then be earlier than the scholia, while mine might come either before or after.

⁹ For the identification of Latin *tinea*, cf. I. C. Beavis, *Insects and Other Invertebrates in Classical Antiquity*, Exeter, 1988, 136-40.

¹⁰ R. D. Brown (*Lucretius on Love and Sex*, Leiden, 1987) discusses the connotations and distribution of *pertundere*, with further bibliography, in his note on 4.1287: he suggests that obscene connotations “may be vaguely sensed beneath the surface” of that passage.

¹¹ If we wished to make the obscene meaning the primary one, *percisus*, “sodomized” + “clobbered, battered”, might be tempting. However, this seems unlikely, as the word is rather too low in tone for our context.