

Juvenal's Vowel Movements
Christopher M. Brunelle (St. Olaf College)

Any ancient writer worth his salt will cause his commentators to note the aural qualities of his words. Juvenal has been less successful than some; scholars tend to focus on his disagreeable content and his striking verbal formulae to the exclusion of his sonic patterns. In their surveys of Latin verse, Herescu (*La poésie latine*) and Wilkinson (*Golden Latin Artistry*) each mention Juvenal exactly once; Eskuche (“Juvenals Versbau,” in Friedländer’s 1895 edition) is silent on the issue of satirical sound; Friedländer and Courtney generally limit themselves to noting alliteration.

Nevertheless, Juvenal’s verses reveal a previously unrecognized connection between sound and sense. His hexameters are often constructed so that a semantic surprise falls at the end of the line, and in this type of hexameter Juvenal reinforces that surprise by including, in the final foot of the line, a vowel that has not yet been used in that same line. The unexpected sound of the word strengthens its unexpected meaning.

In Juvenal 1-5, Braund (1996, 26) lists 15 instances of “surprise or deflation” at the end of a hexameter; 11 of these 15 (73%) also include a new vowel (3.207, *et divina opici rodebant carmina mures*) or new vowel length (1.116, *quaeque salutato crepitat Concordia nido*) in the sixth foot. Juvenal 6 offers similar material, e.g. *invenies omnis turpes similesque cinaedis* (6.03) and *viderunt primos argentea saecula moechos* (6.24). By comparison, a random sample of sixty hexameters (lines 21-30 from each of the first six satires) shows that such new vowels are the exception rather than the norm: 33 of those 60 lines have no new vowel or vowel length in the sixth foot.

These categories are not perfectly definitive. Some lines can not be assigned to one category because of indeterminable hidden quantities (e.g. *indulsisse tribuno*, 2.165) or the lack of scholarly consensus over the pronunciation of elisions (e.g. *rationem admittitis edam*, 1.21). Nor will every scholar agree that a certain word at the end of a line constitutes a surprise. But the general pattern still holds; in particular, Juvenal always saves *cinaedus* for the end of a line (2.10, 4.106, 6.03, 14.30; *moechus* likewise usually ends a line) and its Greek diphthong is always as unexpected as its Greek meaning.

Juvenal also employs vocalic novelty in smaller phrases. He often juxtaposes two tonally antithetical words (Urech, *Hoher und niderer Stil in den Satiren Juvenals* 8-11), and these two words often oppose one another in their vowels as well as their sense: *luxuriae sordes* (1.140), *iratis plaudendum* (1.146), *Palatino et tegetem* (6.117), *meretrix Augusta* (6.118).

Sonic patterns are not inherently ugly or beautiful. Vocalic novelty at the end of a line can be lovely; Wilkinson thought that there was “no finer-sounding verse in Virgil than ‘*Laomedontae luimus periuria Troiae*’” (*G.* 1.502; *Golden Latin Artistry* 17), and Reckford finds Persius’ viscous but monotonous *uncta cadunt laxis tunc pulmentaria labris* (3.102) to be “one of the ugliest lines in Latin literature” (*Arethusa* 1998 348). Juvenal can repeat a vowel to make his own satirical point: *traditur ecce viro clarus genere atque opibus vir* (2.129) is a specimen of indignant polyptoton. But symmetry is often an element of beauty (Herescu 82-124), and Juvenal subverts that symmetry to caustic effect.

In a limerick, the format demands that the meaning of the final word should be a surprise but its rhyme must not. Juvenal has created a satiric inversion of the limerick; the words that end his hexameters are often a surprise, but so are their sounds.