Ovid’s Janus and the Start of the Year in Renaissance *Fasti Sacri*

A neglected but rich chapter in the reception history of Ovid is the fortune of his calendar-poem, the *Fasti,* during the Renaissance: as focus for humanists’ new kind of antiquarian commentary; as source of erotic tales for artists (Botticelli, Piero di Cosimo, and Bellini) who in essence assimilated the *Fasti* to the *Metamorphoses*; and as template and foil for neo-Latin calendrical poetry. The paper concentrates on the lattermost group of texts, the *Fasti Sacri* as they are often titled, which adapt Ovid’s day-by-day structure and aetiological focus to the liturgical calendar of the Christian Church. The form became popular among humanist poets in Italy (Lazzarelli [c. 1485], Bonincontri [1491], Mantuan [1516], Fracco [1547]), whence it spread to the Protestant north (Chytraeus, 1568) and later to France (Vaillant, 1674).

Of particular interest in these texts is the convergence of literary homage, theological critique, and allegorical interpretation of Ovid’s poem. As a window into this complex dynamic I examine three neo-Latin responses to Ovid’s account of the first day of the year, particularly his depiction of the first month’s eponymous deity, Janus, who is depicted appearing to the poet to field questions both about himself and about the Roman rituals of January 1.

Consonant with the unique structure of his 16-book *Fasti Christianae religionis* (as opposed to the more common 12-book structure mirroring the cycle of months), Lazzarelli starts not with Jan. 1 but rather with Advent Sunday, the first day of the ecclesiastical year. Nonetheless, for that day he conjures up a holy interlocutor, St. Peter, whose depiction and initial words strongly style him a Christian equivalent to Ovid’s Janus, who is never mentioned: *claviger* (Ovidian coinage); keys as *arma*; *caelestis ianitor aulae*. But Peter’s ensuing aetiological disquisition on Advent then proceeds without further reference to Ovid’s divine encounter on the year’s first day.

Mantuan meditates differently on the same Ovidian text in unfolding the inaugural feast day of his calendar, Christ’s Circumcision celebrated on Jan. 1. After explaining the holy day, Mantuan turns to the name of January and thus to Janus, expatiating upon this logical appendix at considerable length. Here Mantuan takes up the subjects of Janus’ first speech to Ovid—the god’s identity, name, etc.—but *in propria persona*, without any sacred interlocutor. The poet interprets Janus’ words from a Biblical perspective—e.g. Janus was in fact Noah, who after the Deluge traveled to the site that would be Rome. Though Mantuan’s language and style is much less heavily indebted to Ovid’s January 1 than is Lazzarelli, there is a clear point-by-point Christian correction of Ovid, cast in terms of illuminating the ignorance of antiquity.

Fracco’s *Sacri Fasti* combines the approaches of Mantuan and Lazzarelli to produce the most thoroughgoing humanist imitation of Ovid’s *Fasti*. Like the former, on Jan. 1 he treats the Circumcision and identity of Janus. Like the latter, he adopts the dialog scenario and language of Ovid, but develops both very extensively. In place of Janus, the Trinity visits Fracco—a triple deity to trump the double god. Ecclesiastical material is presented in Ovidian terms while Ovid’s pagan perspective is critiqued. Eg. Where Ovid is addressed as *vates, Romani conditor anni*, Fracco is *vates, melioris conditor anni.* Ovid’s Janus was originally Chaos; Fracco’s Trinity is “before Chaos.”