

## Empedoclean Elements: Janus's Interview and Cyclic Time in the *Fasti*

When Janus appears to Ovid at the beginning of the *Fasti*, he describes an Empedoclean cosmology in which the four elements “were one heap” and how through strife “the mass dissolved and went into their new homes” (*unus acervus erat. / inque novas abiit massa soluta domos*. I.106, 108). Scholars like Richard King have noted the Hesiodic references in this cosmology, showing how Ovid appears to mimic the *Theogony* by giving the origins of the universe: he argues that by this passage's mythological focus, Janus is constructing an autobiography in which he describes his historical formation from an unshaped mass (King 2006, 80). This interpretation, which treats the cosmology as the first event in the continual passage of linear time, focuses on the calendar as what King calls an “enchainment of events” and a “symbolic sequence” (King 2006, 69-70). Francesca Martelli also interprets this passage as “emphasizing the god's connection with historical, rather than calendrical time” (Martelli 2013, 117). Nevertheless, this interpretation of Janus' cosmology, in its emphasis on Janus as giving an historical or mythological narrative, ignores the Empedoclean references to cyclic time. In this paper, I will discuss how Ovid uses Janus' cosmology to reflect on the meaning of the Roman calendar, in which the events of linear time are embedded within the cycle of the Roman year, and by which the events of the distant past transgress hundreds of years to step into present consciousness.

I will employ three key pieces of evidence to show why the passage thematizes the cycle of time to initiate a poem on the cycle of the Roman calendar. First, this passage employs Empedoclean themes, by describing the four elements (air, fire, water, earth) that are one mass (Ham 2013, 223-5). Empedocles' cosmology emphasizes the cycle of time, in which “the many

are turned to one, and in turn out of one, the many separate” (τοτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἔν ηὐξήθη μόνον εἶναι ἐκ πλεόνων, τοτὲ δ’ αὖ διέφυ πλεόν’ ἐξ ἐνὸς εἶναι DK Fr. 17). Second, Janus goes on to say, “I returned into my appearance” and “the same form which was in me before, was in me again” (*in faciem redii; ante quod est in me postque videtur idem Fasti* 1.112, 114). Janus’ language portrays a cosmos that moves from order to chaos and back to order, in a cycle. Third, the very choice of Janus, whose dicephaly implies, as Martelli argues, the liminality between the new and old year (Martelli 2013, 117), shows that the past is in continual interaction with the present. But how can the events of the past so powerfully influence or transgress into the present? This is the question that Ovid is trying to answer in his poem on a calendar that is punctuated with memorials of the Roman past. In contrast to linear descriptions of events, Ovid reflects on how the past influences the daily life of the present, and he uses the repeating cycle of Janus’ cosmology to show how this is possible.

### Bibliography

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