Calendar and Cosmos: the role of Janus and *lis* in Ovid's *Fasti*

The cosmogony at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has received a great deal of scholarly attention, but less studied is its brief counterpart in the first book of his *Fasti* (1.105-10). It is the god Janus who relates this twin cosmogony, informing the poet that the ancients used to call him *Chaos* (1.103). This unprecedented identification of Janus with Chaos means that both the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses* begin with Chaos/Janus. In S. Hinds' (1987) words "the invitation to compare and contrast the two poems goes right back to the beginning of each." Hinds' study *The Metamorphosis of Persephone* is representative of what scholars have come to acknowledge as the complex intertextual relationship between the *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*; but it is still the case that the *Metamorphoses*, long held in higher critical regard than the *Fasti*, has most often been the focus of critics' attempts to understand the relationship between the two poems. In this paper, however, I focus on one aspect of Janus' cosmogony in the *Fasti*, *lis*, which it shares with the cosmogony in the *Metamorphoses*, but develops to a greater extent, in order to shed light both on the role of *lis* in the opening of the *Fasti* and its parallel use in the *Metamorphoses*.

Ovid first draws attention to the role of *lis* in Janus' cosmogony through contrast with its role in the *Metamorphoses*. In the epic poem *lis* describes the "strife" between the elements and qualities that Ovid's *deus et melior natura* resolves in the transformation of Chaos (1.21). In the *Fasti*, however, it is the "strife" (*lis*) itself of the elements that accomplishes the same transformation into cosmic order (1.107). S. Wheeler (1995) has argued that in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid intentionally contrasts a "creationist" cosmogony with the "evolutionary" type of cosmogony exemplified in the *Fasti*. In Wheeler's argument, the cosmogony of the *Metamorphoses* is thus programmatic and the guiding hand of the demiurge corresponds to "Ovid's new role as epic poet and creator of cosmic order." Yet, Wheeler's conclusion that Janus' cosmogony is simply "evolutionary" and thus that the *Fasti* lacks a similar "creator of cosmic order" does not take into account the larger context of *Fasti* 1. Ovid creates a close parallel between the universe and the calendar, which, when recognized, suggests that Janus in the *Fasti* plays a similar role to that of the cosmic demiurge in the *Metamorphoses*.

Shortly after the cosmogony in *Fasti* 1, *lis* occurs again, this time in an explicitly calendrical context. The poet asks the god Janus why he has allowed court cases (*lites*) on the Kalends of January (*post ea mirabar, cur non sine litibus esset* / *prima dies*, 1.165-66): the god answers that it is to forestall the auspice of an "idle year" (*annus iners*, 1.168). I argue that this plural use of *lis* alludes to Janus' recently narrated cosmogony, which is supported by the strikingly similar role of *lis* or *lites* in cosmogony and calendar. Since the adjective *iners* etymologically means *in-ars* or "without art or craft," the phrase *iners annus* means "a year without *ars*." This suggests that the universe and the calendar share a common set of principles or laws and that the role of strife (*lis* or, as in the poet's query, *lites*) as a creative force is foremost among these. At the same time, the etymology of *iners* (or *in-ars*), which Janus opposes to *lites*, also suggests an association between *lis*/*lites* and poetry; therefore Janus' "crafting" of the year further suggests that he is a poetological figure like that of Wheeler's demiurge in the *Metamorphoses*.

The "cosmic setting" (for the term, cf. Hardie (1986)) of Janus' establishment of *lites* on the Kalends is not only suggested by allusion to the role of *lis* in the cosmogony of the *Fasti*, but also by allusion to the twin cosmogony of the *Metamorphoses*. The key phrase *iners annus* recalls one of the descriptions of chaos in the *Metamorphoses*, *iners pondus* (1.8), the formless mass eventually shaped by *deus et melior natura*. I argue, therefore, that Janus similarly helps to "craft" the year through his establishment of *lites* on the Kalends of January and thus Ovid creates a parallel between the calendar and the universe. These observations on Janus and *lis* contribute both to the understanding of Janus' programmatic role in the *Fasti*, as well as more generally to the continuing evaluation of the intertextual relationship between the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*.

Works Cited

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