

Against Augustus' Fixity of Form: An Example of Ovid's Rhetoric of Repetition

Structural analyses of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have highlighted, among other Ovidian hallmarks, the fact that the poet enjoys repeating himself. Repetition happens on multiple levels within the epic: 1) the poet repeats familiar Greek myths by retelling them; 2) he is repetitive in that he juxtaposes variants of the same type of tale (for example a group of love stories based on the binary opposition between hunting and loving, as Davis 1983 points out); 3) he repeats himself within the poem by continuously returning to the same notions and imagery (Hinds 1996; Williams 1978).

Although the third kind of repetition is also discernible in other works, such as in the *Ars Amatoria*, in the *Metamorphoses* it occurs with remarkable frequency. This is due in part to the stylistic conventions of the epic genre, hence to the recurrence of formulaic expressions and scenes that convey an idea of continuity: epic continues itself as a genre precisely because of repetition (Hardie 1993). In part, however, Ovid uses repetition as the means to express the eternal mutability of forms: thus chaos becomes order, but order reverts again to chaos before the end of Book 1 (Wheeler 2000).

In this paper I argue that Ovid's rhetoric of repetition in the description of the creation of the world has political undertones. More precisely, I suggest that Ovid's cosmogony is meant to ridicule the pretense to power of Augustus by countering the emperor's interpretation of reality as fixity of form: to the emperor's attempt to freeze space, time and the physiognomy of the world by peace (Barchiesi 1997), Ovid responds by denying closed form to the *kosmos* he envisions. Several elements point in this direction: first Ovid undermines the authoritativeness of the demiurge responsible for the creation (a figure that is often associated with Augustus) by repeatedly referring to him in vague terms and by questioning his role in creating humankind.

Furthermore, abrupt shifts of focalizations also contribute to undermine the demiurge's power, while pointing to the fluidity and unpredictability of the physical reality he allegedly controls. For example, immediately after his description of the demiurge's separation of chaos into four elements and regions (*Met.* 1.21-25), Ovid repeats the same description from the perspective of the elements themselves (1.26-31): ungoverned and ungovernable, the elements take on new forms on their own, a hint to the fact that they might continue to do so even at a later stage.

Third, Ovid refuses to present the process of creation through an evolutionary sequence that follows a linear chronology. Instead he throws the chronological development of creation into confusion through repetitions that seemingly make no sense: for example at 1.36-37 the winds make their first appearance on earth, but it is only at 1.56 that the creation of the winds is explicitly described. Although these kinds of contradictory repetitions can be dismissed as mere redundancy (Bömer 1958), I would like to offer an alternative explanation: the juxtaposition of nearly identical scenes of creation and transformation forbids a teleological (and logical) reading of the process of creation, a further blow to the emperor-demiurge and to his attempt to fixate chaos into an orderly sequence of discrete, permanent forms.

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