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A Reconsideration of Ovid's *Fasti*

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We have come a long way from Michael Verinus's fifteenth-century estimate of Ovid's *Fasti* as "illius diuini uatis liber pulcherrimus."¹ Those who now consider the elegy from a literary standpoint generally see it as little more than momentary flashes of genuine poetry against a chaotic, weak background.² Ironically, one of the poem's chief modern exponents, Sir James George Frazer, has through his very approach helped to establish the work as an antiquarian curiosity, and the *Fasti* fades into obscurity among the anthropological oddities it treats.³ But though we may never recover the Florentine humanist's enthusiasm, we cannot so easily walk around a work squarely and stubbornly rooted in the middle of the Ovidian canon.

¹ Cited in Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, rev. edn. (New York 1967), p. 114n.

² For example, comparing the *Fasti*'s style with that of the *Metamorphoses*, Brooks Otis comments that the diverse tales of the former were only loosely strung together by the calendar format, and that "Such 'links' were themselves a sign of discontinuity . . ." (*Ovid as an Epic Poet*, 2nd edn. [Cambridge 1970], p. 333). L. P. Wilkinson also complains of the fragment's "haphazard" structure and its shallowness, concluding that "Ovid was interested primarily in rhetorical or literary effect, and only secondarily in truth" (*Ovid Recalled* [Cambridge 1955], pp. 269 and 266). Similarly, Hermann Fränkel condemns the endeavor because "to versify and adorn an almanac was not a sound proposition in the first place." The critic finally decides that one might best read the *Fasti* "as if it were a book for children" (*Ovid: A Poet Between Two Worlds* [Berkeley and Los Angeles 1945], pp. 148 and 149). In his *History in Ovid* (Oxford 1978), Ronald Syme notes this last judgment and suggests that Ovid himself would perhaps concur with the adverse reaction (p. 36).

³ See the massive four-volume commentary appended to his edition and translation of the poem (London 1929).

In the following pages, I wish to suggest an approach which might further an appreciation of the poem, examining it as a reflection upon the contrast between the often arbitrary, obscure conceptualizations by which man orders his existence, and the eternal regularity of the stars. The calendar, itself a human construct based upon the ordered motion of the heavens, provides an appropriate focus for this meditation. Without denying that the state of the text as we have it prevents definitive assertions, I think we can in this way outline a thematic thrust which, once recognized, transforms the fragment from a disjointed, superficial narrative to the first movement of a coherent, perhaps even quietly profound, consideration of order, time, and permanence.

The *Fasti*'s numerous technical inaccuracies prove the poet no astronomer, "being a townsman writing a work of literature for townsmen who had long since regulated their lives by looking at calendars instead of stars."⁴ Yet Ovid defines man in *Metamorphoses* 1. 84–86 as a congenital stargazer,⁵ and never loses sight of the constellations' value as *signa*. Although W. R. Johnson alone strikes me as treating the *Fasti*'s intellectual seriousness fairly, I disagree with his conclusion that the poet can find no focus once the religious motif disintegrates.⁶ Ovid fully recognized, from the very inception of his calendar poem, that he would be writing about "illusions and disenchantments," all grounded in the shifting, arbitrary nature of many human beliefs and practices, whose origins and rationales are seldom clear; but he also saw that this instability is finally balanced by the recurrent stellar cycles. Whatever sacred sites or myths humans may design, these are all secondary to the eternal symbols of genuine constancy circling far above our world. Thus Ovid punctuates his work repeatedly with references to the monthly astronomical motion, a subtle counterpoint to the frequently "entropic" narrative units.⁷ Far from having nothing to do with the thematic progression, these

⁴ Wilkinson, p. 265.

⁵ *Pronaque cum spectent animalia cetera terram, / os homini sublime dedit caelumque uiderel / iussit et erectos ad sidera tollere uultus. . . .* The last line of this passage is itself echoed in *Fasti* 2. 75. Franz Bömer, in the commentary to his two-volume edition of the *Fasti* (Heidelberg 1957–58) notes the parallel, Bd. 2, p. 87.

⁶ W. R. Johnson, "The Desolation of the *Fasti*," *Classical Journal* 74 (1978), 7–18.

⁷ Recent scholarship has demonstrated a certain structural order within individual parts of the overall "blur" Ovid depicts. For the most recent assessment see L. Braun, "Kompositionskunst in Ovids 'Fasti'," in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2. 31. 4 (1981), 2344–83. For a summary of earlier work, consult John Barsby, *Ovid* (Oxford 1978), pp. 28–29 and his notes.

terse, epigrammatic interjections recall to the reader that, however jumbled the antiquarian lore surrounding any given festivity may be, the true indicators of permanence and order remain fixed in their celestial paths; as such, the passages constitute a possible bridge to what Richard Lanham calls the characteristic “hole”—the lack of a central, controlling principle—in the middle of the Ovidian text.⁸

The *Fasti*'s opening couplet, charged with an epic urgency, establishes the program the poet will follow in both the elegy's opening segment and the poem as a whole: “Tempora cum causis Latium digesta per annum / lapsaque sub terras orta que signa canam” (1. 1–2).⁹ Besides *tempora* (the times, the measure) and “causes,” he will treat the ultimate source or cause of all temporal order, the *signa* by which we mark the passage of time itself. But as Ovid sets out to fulfil this plan, he confronts us immediately with an image of the arbitrary, transient nature of humanly-fashioned “order.” Speaking of the original ten-month format of the Roman calendar, the narrator humorously addresses its designer, “scilicet arma magis quam sidera, Romule, noras, / cura que finitimos uincere maior erat” (1. 29–30). Unmindful of stellar motion, the ancients instead founded their *ratio* for allotting this specific amount of time to the year upon human physical and social functions, such as the gestation period for an infant or a widow's prescribed term of mourning (1. 33–36). However reasonable this may have seemed to the planners, the structure of Romulus's calendar proves inadequate, and has to be adjusted by Numa.

Since the year begins with January, we are not surprised when the poet turns to the month proper to find him invoking Janus. It soon becomes clear, however, that this god's primacy in the *Fasti* goes beyond his eponymous status. The twin-faced deity in fact participates in the same kind of duality active at the poem's core: just as the stellar and human orders constitute the calendar, so Janus's visage attests to his position as both a guardian of divine boundaries and a symbol of arbitrary, chaotic form. At his coming, the narrator dismisses the legal wrangling which distinguishes *fasti* from *nefasti*, described at 1. 45–62, and directs attention to the sacrificial fires in a

⁸ Richard A. Lanham, *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (New Haven and London 1976), p. 50. On the epigrammatic dimension of the astronomical passages see C. Santini, “Motivi Astronomici e Moduli Didattici nei ‘Fasti’ di Ovidio,” *Giornale Italiano di Filologia* 27 (1975), 1–26.

⁹ All quotations from the *Fasti* refer to Bömer, with minor typographical adjustments.

line which could, curiously, refer to the etherial “fires,” the stars, as well (l. 73–76):

lite uacent aures, insanaque protinus absint
iurgia! differ opus, liuida turba, tuum!
cernis, odoratis ut luceat ignibus aether,
et sonet accensis spica Cilissa focus?

But we learn that if Janus’s birth at the beginning of time corresponds to the establishment of universal order, his two faces serve as a reminder of the degree of disorder in his own being. The god himself indicates this in the description of his origins (l. 111–14):

tunc ego, qui fueram globus et sine imagine moles,
in faciem redii dignaque membra deo.
nunc quoque, confusae quondam nota parua figurae,
ante quod est in me postque, uidetur idem.

More importantly, the chaotic aspect encoded in his appearance carries over to the various *causae* he offers the poet. For example, the variant explications of the god’s shape which effectively answer the questions posed at lines 89–92 also, when taken together, exhibit a certain incongruity. After making the statement just quoted, Janus goes on to say that he assumes the double visage *because* of his position as heaven’s porter (133–40). His 360° vision may make him an appropriate candidate for the job, but the janitorial function is hardly the *cause* of his form. The slight confusion here is perhaps highlighted by the mock-serious stance of the god, who begins with the statement *sum res prisca* (103) and concludes by noting that his two faces prevent him from “losing time” twisting his neck to observe those who come and go (143–44). He again falls to inconsistency later when, after launching into a vituperative harangue against modern greed suggesting that money has become an acceptable sacrifice because it is so highly overvalued by men, he concludes that the gods actually enjoy the gold (223–26). By the end, Janus confuses the details of his own function outright: at lines 279–82, he states that his gates are closed in peacetime in order to hold peace in; at lines 121–24 he had indicated that the closed doors prevent war from bursting forth. Here, as we will see throughout the poem, the *causae* listed are for the most part, whether offered by man or god, multiple and potentially contradictory.

However, as human constructs break down and even the reason of the deities becomes muddled, the poet turns to the stars in the ensuing encomium of the astronomer’s vocation. When Janus takes his leave, the narrator interjects, “Quis uetat et stellas, ut quaeque

oriturque caditque, / dicere? promissi pars sit et ista mei" (l. 295–96). He praises the "happy souls" whose contemplation of the stars has lifted them above the impediments and subjects that hinder and preoccupy mortals (l. 297–306):

felices animae, quibus haec cognoscere primis
 inque domus superas scandere cura fuit!
 credibile est illos pariter utriusque locisque
 altius humanis exseruisse caput.
 non Venus et uinum sublimia pectora fregit
 officiumque fori militiaeque labor,
 nec leuis ambitio perfusaque gloria fuco
 magnarumque fames sollicitauit opum.
 admouere oculis distantia sidera nostris
 aetheraque ingenio supposuere suo.

Through this study men are able to reach the sky: "sic petitur caelum, non ut ferat Ossan Olympus / summaque Peliacus sidera tangat apex" (307–08). Next to their office, all other human activity seems as futile as the giants' attack on the gods. Finally, though the *signa* "wander," the astronomers' understanding of their regular motion permits us to "measure out" or chart the heavens: "nos quoque sub ducibus caelum metabimur illis / ponemusque suos ad uaga signa dies" (309–10). Not accidentally, the encomium directly introduces the first of many constellation notices (311–14):

ergo ubi nox aderit uenturis tertia nonis
 sparsaque caelesti rore madebit humus,
 octipedis frustra quaerentur bracchia Cancri:
 praeceps occiduas ille subibit aquas.

Thus the poem's first movement, capped by the simple surety of this statement, lends the stellar signs a peculiar eminence. The *signa*, which alone sweep out the flow of all *tempora*, preside over the uncertain, makeshift *causae*.

The further the reader proceeds, the more dissatisfied he becomes with the various aetiological quests. On the one hand, the encyclopedic multiplicity of *causae* surrounding certain of the subjects only forces us to realize the arbitrariness of human ingenuity. Any number of reasons might be concocted to explain a particular phenomenon, each one as good as another; as such, the value of explication erodes considerably. An example of this begins at l. 317, where Ovid attempts to discern the rationale behind the term "Agonal," and comes up with no fewer than five possibilities. He opts for the last as the true one without offering any justification for his choice, saying

simply “ueraque iudicio est ultima causa meo” (332). In the discussion of sacrificial traditions that follows, on the other hand, the *causae* he discovers for the animal slaughter seem sufficiently flimsy to excite a comic sympathy for the fates of the sheep and oxen (l. 383–84) and, later, the geese (453–54). Hyperion is propitiated with a horse, for instance, “ne detur celeri uictima tarda deo” (386). The sacrifice of the various animals to their respective deities appears, ultimately, as frivolously random a matter as the source of “Agonal.”¹⁰

Seldom in the *Fasti* can the poet settle on one derivation, and *aut* becomes a presiding word. When tracing the source of the Lupercal ritual at 2. 267–424, he completes one legend only to declare, “adde peregrinis causas, mea Musa, Latinas, / inque suo noster puluere currat equus” (359–60). The Latin explanation will do as well as the Greek, no preference ventured. Similarly, in the description of Anna Perenna’s festival in Book 3, the poet states, “quae tamen haec dea sit, quoniam rumoribus errat / fabula, proposito nulla tegenda meo” (543–44), and proceeds to mention six different identities for the goddess. Discussing the Parilia in Book 4, the narrator actually expresses intimidation at the proliferation of *causae*: “turba facit dubium coeptaque nostra tenet” (784). Ovid’s scholarship, as I think he is well aware and intends to convey, recurrently dissolves into guesswork. Men are capable of fashioning any number of reasons for their ritual behavior; no one can hope to light upon the single “true” aetiology amid the diffusion of mutually coherent legends.

The most salient instances of this multiplicity occur at the beginnings of Books 5 and 6, where the goddesses dispute the derivations of the months’ names. If the poet was intimidated by the number of *causae* surrounding the Parilia, he feels completely abashed at the opening of 5 (1–6):

Quaeritis, unde putem Maio data nomina mensi?
 non satis est liquido cognita causa mihi.
 ut stat et incertus, qua sit sibi, nescit, eundum,
 cum uidet ex omni parte uiator iter,
 sic, quia posse datur diuersas reddere causas,
 qua ferar, ignoro, copiaque ipsa nocet.

Three Muses speak up, each claiming respectively that May takes its name from “Majesty,” “*maiores*,” and “Maia.” In truly politic manner, the poet quietly records each version of the story, refusing to pass

¹⁰ For an extended treatment of this difficult portion of the Ovidian text see Eckhard Lefèvre, “Die Lehre von der Entstehung der Tieropfer in Ovids Fasten I, 335–456,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 119 n.F. (1976), 39–64.

judgment (108–10). Ovid finds himself in a similar position exactly one book later; and here again, he shifts the burden of decision to the reader: “Hic quoque mensis habet dubias in nomine causas: / quae placeat, positis omnibus ipse lege” (6. 1–2). The contending deities in 6 are Juno, who claims June was named for herself, Iuventas (Hebe), who holds that “Iunius est iuuenum” (88), and Concordia, who attributes the name to the “junction” of Tatius’s and Romulus’s kingdoms. At the end, the poet politely withdraws, noting that “perierunt iudice formae / Pergama; plus laedunt, quam iuuet una, duae” (99–100). In this poem of peace, he eschews all strife. All the proffered *causae* appear sensible, and he would be as foolish as Paris to select among them.

Once we recognize the intentional aspect of the chaos in the poem, we can perhaps see the *Fasti* as participating, after the fashion of the *Metamorphoses*, in what Johnson has called the counter-classical sensibility.¹¹ Augustus’s leadership will supposedly restore the golden age of our origins that the work ostensibly celebrates. The emperor strives to preserve the ancient shrines from decay (2. 57–64), and his efforts have resulted in the *mille Lares* established throughout the city (5. 145–46). But the narrator prefaces this last point with a note that “multa uetustas / destruit: et saxo longa senecta nocet” (5. 131–32), and mentions a few lines later “bina gemellorum quaerebam signa deorum: / uiribus annosae facta caduca morae” (143–44). And, far more important, there is the nature of the poem itself: the praise Ovid offers Augustus as the guardian of the sacred rituals, I think, hardly stands up in context against the flood of confusion and obscurity rushing all about its foundations. In the background seems to lie the implication that Caesar cannot ultimately hope to resuscitate or maintain the abstruse mythic structures in the face of human frailty and time’s eroding power. The obsequious gesture harbors a more subtle skepticism.

But in order to gain a sense of stability in the midst of this chaos, we need only look to the skies, as Ovid makes plain in Book 3 where he again brings up the crafting of the original calendar, which the early Romans’ ignorance of astronomy dooms to fail (99–104):

nec totidem ueteres, quot nunc, habuere kalendas,
 ille minor geminis mensibus annus erat.
 nondum tradiderat uictas uictoribus artes
 Graecia, facundum, sed male forte genus:

¹¹ W. R. Johnson, “The Problem of the Counter-Classical Sensibility and its Critics,” *California Studies in Classical Antiquity* 3 (1970), 123–51.

qui bene pugnabat, Romanam nouerat artem,
mittere qui poterat pila, disertus erat.

This is less a snide invective against the effeminate Greeks than a comic indictment of the Roman emphasis on *arma*. (We recall the statement at the *Fasti's* outset, "Caesaris arma canant alii, nos Caesaris aras . . ." [1. 13], and the astronomers' disdain for warfare.) The poet continues (105–12):

quis tunc aut Hyadas aut Pleiadas Atlanteas
senserat aut geminos esse sub axe polos,
esse duas Arctos, quarum Cynosura petatur
Sidoniis, Helicen Graia carina notet,
signaque quae longo frater percenseat anno,
ire per haec uno mense sororis equos?
libera currebant et inobseruata per annum
sidera. . . .

Instead, we have the ironic reduction of lines 113–14, "non illi caelo labentia signa tenebant, / sed sua, quae magnum perdere crimen erat." Romulus's people ground their ten-month calendar in the same kind of arbitrary thought process, delineated in lines 121–134, standing behind most ordering constructs. But only the stars accurately measure the year's length, and Caesar revises the calendar: "ille moras solis, quibus in sua signa rediret, / traditur exactis disposuisse notis" (161–62).

Once the reader grasps the centrality of the stars to the fabric of the work, he begins to realize that, far from being mere clumsy or even distracting junctures, the astronomical references serve as subtle reminders of the eternal certainty and order of stellar motion, contrasting with the often confused aetiological lore. Even the form of these references holds significance: they are (as Carlo Santini observes¹²) mostly brief, epigrammatic statements; as such, they stand in contradistinction to the aetiologies' protracted catalogues or legends. This becomes clear if we reconsider the first book. Ovid prefaces the long passage treating the Agonal rite and animal sacrifice, mentioned above, with the two short references to the constellations of the Crab (311–14) and the Lyre (315–16). Likewise, after the narrative has run its course, the poet suddenly interjects, "interea Delphin clarum super aequora sidus / tollitur et patriis exserit ora uadis" (457–58). Following the problematic section, this terse, simple expression seems to recall the reader to the surety of

¹² Santini (above, note 8), 10–11.

celestial recurrence. And just as this reference, coupled with the subsequent line's "Postera lux hiemem medio discrimine signat" (459), completes the frame begun at 311–16, it also initiates the frame for the next narrative unit, which in turn ultimately lapses into a set of three astronomical notations in lines 651–56. Moreover, in these last passages the Muse herself rebukes the poet for seeking regularity in the wrong places: "utque dies incerta sacri, sic tempora certa . . ." (661).

Moving on to the second book, we see how the stellar references continue to counter the often dubious mythological narrative. February opens with a discussion of the purification rituals from which the month supposedly derives its name, rites which the poet asserts were founded on extremely tenuous preconceptions: "ah! nimium faciles, qui tristia crimina caedis / fluminea tolli posse putatis aqua!" (2. 45–46). But after we learn that the entire placement of the month has shifted, and hear briefly of Caesar's "glory" (which was nevertheless unable to preserve the shrines of Sospita), we appropriately encounter at lines 73–78 the unshifting certainty of the constellations:

Proximus Hesperias Titan abiturus in undas
 gemmea purpureis cum iuga demet equis,
 illa nocte aliquis tollens ad sidera uultum
 dicet "ubi est hodie, quae Lyra fulsit heri?"
 dumque Lyram quaeret, medii quoque terga Leonis
 in liquidas subito mersa notabit aquas.

Naturally, the stars themselves provide bases for mythological imagination; even Romulus's ignorant tribe attributed deity to them (3.111–12). Beginning in 2, Ovid elaborates on the tales behind the constellations. But again, as with the rest of the myths, the stories project an aura of uncertainty. For example, the dolphin wins its place among the stars "seu fuit occultis felix in amoribus index, / Lesbida cum domino seu tulit ille lyram" (2. 81–82). In the fourth book, similarly, the narrator posits variant reasons why only six of the seven Pleiades can be seen (171–78); nor can he definitely settle on the nature of the Hyades at 5. 159–82 or the Bull at 5. 603–20. Ovid's point is precisely that, whatever names are assigned to these guides, or whatever stories or rites grow up around them, the constructs remain secondary to the simple factuality of the stellar cycles. Aetiological study can only go so far; the poet is always left to look to the sky for a picture of true order.

Repeatedly the narrator directs our eyes upward. In Book 3 he seems to pun on the forms of *suspicio*. Trying to work out the

significance of the name “Veious” etymologically, he concludes, “uis ea si uerbi est, cur non ego Veious aedem / aedem non magni suspicer esse Iouis?” (447–48). But he immediately continues: “iamque, ubi caeruleum uariabunt sidera caelum, / suspice” (449–50). *Suspicion* or conjecture gives way to *observation* of the stars. Likewise, the flurry of possibilities surrounding the feast of Anna Perenna, coupled with the assassination of Caesar, fades into a brief reference to the Scorpion at 3. 711–12. Subsequently, the poet turns to the “star of the Kite” (3. 793–94) after running into difficulties determining the reason for the “toga libera” in the Bacchic festival, and to the sun’s entry into the sign of the Ram (3. 851–52) after the confusion over “Minerua Capta” at 835–48.

Read in this light, the *Fasti* becomes a modest celebration of the heavenly perfection standing above all mortal formulation. The poet may wonder at human ingenuity, may be fascinated by mythic or historical lore, may partake in the rites deemed sacred by men; but he remains always acutely aware of human limitation in the presence of eternal order. A particularly stiking demonstration of this occurs at 4. 377–86, where the narrator meets an old soldier at the games honoring the anniversary of Caesar’s victory at Thapsus. Johnson notes that the old man, as “a sudden remnant of the vague, vanished past,”

knows something about this day, this occasion, and, knowing something about the past, perhaps he also knows something about the present and the future that a younger man cannot know. A thunderstorm interrupts the old veteran’s speech, and the conversation that was to have taken place, that might have illumined—what?—is suddenly ended. . . . This moment is a paradigm of all the moments in the poem . . . when we seem on the verge of an illumination only to find that the truth that we thought we had glimpsed has faded back into the incomprehensible welter of days and their vanishing, uncertain rituals and meanings.¹³

I differ from Johnson in that I think this exemplary moment does not signal a point of poetic dissolution in the text, but in fact illustrates Ovid’s theme perfectly. Whatever the old man might say, he can impart nothing more than the same kind of limited information accumulated elsewhere in the poem. The narrator, by the same token, can discover nothing more than what he already knows: namely, that the order governing our lives always was and always will be located solely in the stars. We note that the two speakers are parted when “pendula caelestes Libra mouebat aquas” (386). And appropriately,

¹³ Johnson 1978, 10.

an abrupt reminder of the continuity of stellar motion immediately ensues: "Ante tamen, quam summa dies spectacula sistat, / ensiger Orion aequore mersus erit" (387–88).

Also in Book 4, Ovid has the distraught Ceres, seeking the whereabouts of her abducted daughter, direct her inquiries ultimately not to the nymph Arethusa, as related in the *Metamorphoses* (5. 487 ff.), but to the heavens, turning first to the Hyades and then to the sun (4. 575–84).¹⁴ At the opening of *Fasti* 5, the poet again moves from the confusion obscuring the naming of May to the rising of Capella at lines 111–14. In like manner, after the controversy over the rationale for the name "June" and the discussion of the numerous rites and temples in the first part of Book 6, we come to this reduction: "haec hominum monimenta patent: si quaeritis astra, / tunc oritur magni praepes adunca Iouis" (195–96). Near the conclusion of the same book, Ovid turns from myth and history, and from the quiet reminder of our own mutability at lines 771–72, to a humorous glance at the sky (785–90):

Ecce, suburbana rediens male sobrius aede
ad stellas aliquis talia uerba iacit:
"zona latet tua nunc et cras fortasse latebit:
dehinc erit, Orion, aspiciendi mihi."
at si non esset potus, dixisset eadem
uenturum tempus solstitiale die.

Regardless of the transience of human ritual, the mortality of humans themselves, or even the capacity of the individual inebriated amid his own festivities to recognize their precise implications, the stars shine still.

Thus, these breakages in the narrative flow initiated by the Lyre, the Dolphin, the Bear, and the rest which pass persistently, if furtively, by the reader, are instrumental to the point Ovid wishes to make. As Lanham asserts, this poet "was not bad at transitions";¹⁵ if the junctures seem dissonant, then we must focus on the possible meanings behind these particular points of emphasis. While it is dangerous to speculate on what might have happened in the remainder of an unfinished work, we can reasonably posit, based on further comparison with the *Metamorphoses*, that the role of the stars might have become more explicit as the poem drew on to its close. Reading

¹⁴ Just as the transformation element of the Arethusa story squared better with the *Metamorphoses'* theme, so the more "standard" version of this multiform myth (see, for example, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*) accommodated the *Fasti's* celestial focus.

¹⁵ Lanham (above, note 8), p. 60.

the myths of change catalogued in the *Metamorphoses*, one would hardly see the poem as dealing with permanence. Yet when we reach the final book, we realize that immutability is precisely the poet's topic: in spite of all the turmoil, only forms change (so the Pythagorean tells us) while an essence endures, remains constant, a revelation which itself transforms our reading of the verse up to this point (15. 252–58).¹⁶ Perhaps Ovid would have established a similar element in the *Fasti*'s conclusion, pointing out the stars as the central stabilizing factors. We should note that, as the old man in the *Metamorphoses* turns his speech towards the subject of permanence, he states (15. 147–52):

iuuat ire per alta
 astra, iuuat terris et inertī sede relicta
 nube uehi ualidique umeris insistere Atlantis
 palantesque homines passim et rationis egentes
 despectare procul trepidosque obitumque timentes
 sic exhortari seriemque euoluere fati!

Maybe the heavens themselves were the only bridge spanning the “gulf separating primitive, mythical Rome from the Rome of Virgilian propaganda.”¹⁷ The narrative chaos, matched against celestial continuity, sets up this very contrast in the *Fasti* between the transient and the lasting.

Therefore, Fränkel and Otis miss the point when they fault the poet for attempting ostentatiously to exhibit “profound learning,”¹⁸ or subordinating the various story lines to “curious embellishments and learned asides.”¹⁹ “Learning” is precisely the thing Ovid questions throughout his calendar poem. The information which fills out the months, some of it profuse and some spare, some interesting and some tedious, cumulatively counts for little in the grand sweep of time. The *Fasti* shares with the *Metamorphoses* a fascination with uncertainty and confusion counterpointed by a reaching for permanence. Here the permanence is located in the endless recurrence of the years, measured by the eternal regularity of the stars. The

¹⁶ The precise intention behind the Pythagorean passage remains a major critical issue. See Johnson 1970 (above, note 11), 138 ff., and G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's "Metamorphoses": An Introduction to the Basic Aspects* (Oxford 1975), pp. 104–107 and n. 37 on p. 109. However, our attitude toward the speaker need not affect the present argument: regardless of the old man's ultimate status, the point he makes does offer the reader one other way to digest the compendium of myth encountered up to the final book.

¹⁷ Lanham, p. 50.

¹⁸ Fränkel, p. 146.

¹⁹ Otis, p. 52.

astrological element diminishes the relevance of any earthly matters. The starry *signa*, themselves the source of our *tempora*, finally stand above the *causae* he lists at such careful, insignificant length.²⁰

This last point leads to a final question, namely, why did Ovid protract this “insignificant” narrative to such a degree? The idea of confusion or impermanence might have been conveyed as effectively in much less space. I would suggest here that, despite the ultimate futility involved, human ingenuity delighted the poet, who took care to record those myths and rituals which man constructs to help him cope with the earthly confusion he finds all around him. Critics have argued that the *Metamorphoses* is “about people telling stories and how telling stories is one of the things that people do in order to get through it all,”²¹ that the “point is not to hierarchize—there are no hierarchies here, and no perspectives either—but just to keep going.”²² I think the narrative dimension of the *Fasti* at root partakes of the same spirit. Ovid never condemns the aetiological quest.²³ He simply wishes to demonstrate its tenuous foundation. That is, men have established rituals by which they live their lives, and the legends behind these rites are shifting and obscure. The poet derives from his investigation not only a degree of amusement, but also a genuine feeling of sympathy and wonder at the sheer diversity of the mind in its attempt to justify human order, an order whose prime feature is its problematic multiplicity rather than any sort of unified truth.

The coherence of the *Fasti*, then, is grounded in the poet’s meditation on and celebration of the element of certainty overshadowing the human constructs occupying the foreground of his work. Though Ovid never finished enough of the poem to enable us to determine the extent to which his project might have succeeded, I

²⁰ We may note how this antithesis between chaotic human explication and stellar certainty distinguishes the *Fasti* from its ostensible model, Callimachus’s *Aetia*. In contrast to Ovid’s skeptical overtones, the Greek poet offers alternative responses to specific aetiological questions on only two occasions of which we are aware (fragments 6 and 79 Pf.), and has the Muse resolve the earlier of these in a presumably definitive manner. As a result, Callimachus’s sole reference to a constellation in fragment 110 presents no discernible tension with his poem’s general sense of “Hesiodic” authoritativeness.

²¹ Gordon Braden, *The Classics and English Renaissance Poetry: Three Case Studies* (New Haven and London 1978), p. 52.

²² Lanham, p. 59.

²³ For a discussion of the narrator’s persona in the poem, see Jean-Marc Frécaut, *L’esprit et l’humour chez Ovide* (Grenoble 1972), chap. 5, and John F. Miller, “Ritual Directions in Ovid’s *Fasti*: Dramatic Hymns and Didactic Poetry,” *Classical Journal* 75 (1980), 204–14.

think we are nonetheless capable of discerning what the chief thematic thrust was to be: as all around us may change, including the names of the gods we worship and the reasons for which we worship them as we do, the stars remain as eternal guides, reminders of the one unambiguous form of order. This realization provided the poet, it seems, with a sense of confidence; there was something above the frequently obtrusive pedantry of this world that made it all tolerable, even enjoyable. If anything killed the *Fasti*, I do not think it was, as Johnson suggests, an internal sadness uncovered in the course of composition, but the sadness of Tomis. In the bitterness of exile, the reflection upon universal order gives way to the more individualized poignancy of the *Tristia*.

I would venture a guess that Ovid could only smile at the fact that, barely fifty years after publication, Frazer's voluminous commentary "is being outdated by advances in anthropological method and in comparative religion. . . ." ²⁴ Perhaps only when the reader lays aside the book late at night, and himself glances out at the same stars which overlooked Romulus and Ovid, Verinus and Frazer, can he fully appreciate what the author of the *Fasti* was trying to say. It is a poem whose incompleteness we may very much regret.

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²⁴ Barsby (above, note 7), p. 29n.