

## OVID'S *FASTI* AND AMBIGUITY

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Ovid's *Fasti* are a highly valuable work for the history of religion and politics in the time of Augustus, but its general meaning is not easy to grasp, particularly because of the poet's exile. The work built on the tradition of official calendars that were displayed in public spaces and particularly in sanctuaries. From the second century BCE these calendars set out the divisions of the months, the quality of the different days of the *nundinae*, the *dies fasti* and *nefasti* or indicated the old festivals. Over time they began to note, in red letters, the anniversaries of the main temples as well as other important religious events. It was Fulvius Nobilior who had the first calendar of this type displayed on the walls of the Temple of Hercules of the Muses, consecrated around 180/170 BCE. Since the beginning of the empire, from 31/21 BCE onwards, the constructions, reconstructions or restorations of sanctuaries made by Augustus regularly included *Fasti* of this type, which were provided with supplements and sometimes with short explanations of the old cults and of the new cults created during the last century of the Republic.

It is this custom of providing the feasts and sacrifices of the public liturgical year with supplements and explanations that Ovid takes up in the *Fasti*, composed from 3 CE onwards. The poem consists of a series of commentaries on all the public rites celebrated during the Roman year, that is to say, because Ovid abandoned the project in exile, during the first six months of the year. These comments are obviously more developed than the short texts that appear on the epigraphical documents, and offer what the latter could not give, extensive aetiological accounts. It is these additions that make Ovid's *Fasti* valuable, because they present interpretations of the cults and reveal many additional details. As a result, the six books of the *Fasti* have enjoyed the attention of many modern commentators.

In this well-informed study Š.E. does not engage in a new continuous commentary on these aetiologies, but rather focuses on a particular aspect of the work as a whole. For those who know the poet's joking attitude, this project had a somewhat provocative side, even if the often disrespectful myths told about religious rites and public deities were widespread. These were not sacrileges in themselves, but an element of ancient culture that explored and commented on the meaning of certain rites and cults. However, Ovid's *Fasti* were born in a particular context. On the one hand, the poet was familiar with Julia, the daughter of Augustus, whose conduct aroused the Prince's irritation more and more, to the point of leading to her exile. While his fate was tied to that of Julia, Ovid had ventured into a field that was dear to Augustus, that of the rites and temples of the Roman state that he had restored and rebuilt since his victory in the Civil War. These restorations were the most striking testimony of his refoundation of the State after more than a century of disorder and neglect. The poet's piquant humour was well known; and if the *Metamorphoses*, which present a history of humanity and Rome as a succession of human transformations, up to the last metamorphoses, those of Julius Caesar and of Augustus, scandalised no one, it could be different with an ironic commentary on the rites of the calendar, solemnly restored by Augustus. Even if the details are unknown, it is likely that Ovid's exile in 8 CE interrupted the poet's work, as he mentions in the *Tristia* (2.549ff.).

Š.E. wonders what in this book could have irritated Augustus to the point of exiling the poet. She attributes the main reason for the Prince's anger to Ovid's mischievous humour and his mocking criticism of important initiatives of the new regime, which gave them an image very different from what they were supposed to transmit. So Š.E. implies that Concordia Augusta did not even exist in the house of Augustus. On the other hand, the insistence on the failures of Romulus would allude humorously to the innovations of Augustus. Romulus' apotheosis would have allowed him to mock the projects of Augustus and his divinisation, not hesitating to insist on the simultaneous occurrence of the Quirinalia (interpreted as the feast of the deified Romulus) and the *Stultorum feriae*. The poem would also ironically highlight the birth and the fate of Servius Tullius and those of Augustus, particularly their alleged divine origin. The restoration of the temples is well underlined by Ovid, who, however, cannot help inserting into this praise a remark on the dilapidation of the temple of Juno Sospita. Finally, the balance between praise and scathing irony would also mark, according to the *Fasti*, the relations between Vesta and Augustus, which Ovid seems to mock by relating the scabrous story of Vesta and Priapus on the occasion of the day of the Vestalia. Finally, the creation of the cult of the Lares of the crossroads, initiated by Augustus from 12 BCE, offers the framework for the story of the rape of Lara by Mercury, which would still make it possible to connect Augustus with scandalous behaviour, which, though, probably did not arouse the same negative reaction as today.

It is true that Ovid's style always contains a particular irony. The association of certain festivals and deities with licentious tales including allusions aimed at Augustus and his restoration of Rome cannot be denied. But one may wonder whether we should link these aetiological comments depicted in Ovid's typical style to a political critique as incisive as Š.E. would have it. These are traditional aetiologies that could be expected when there was the question of a particular deity or festival. And above all, the aetiology never offers the deep meaning of a rite. This consists of the correct celebration of what was prescribed. Everyone was free to tell and even invent a story about a celebration. The festival, the divinity or the ritual in some way provoked a comment, created a framework for it, like at a banquet when friends choose a theme for the exchange of opposing arguments. One can well imagine that, when reading or hearing certain verses from the *Fasti*, Augustus might have felt a certain annoyance. But mostly the poet's alleged attack was superficial and did not really question the power of the Prince and of his reorganisation of Rome. At most, these mockeries could constitute an additional argument during the poet's political difficulties due to his links with Julia.

In any case, only a few of Ovid's ambiguous jokes could seem to be challenging Augustus' restorations, to the point of causing the latter to react. However, it should not be forgotten that it was not for these reasons that the poet was exiled and kept in exile, even after the disappearance of the old Prince, whom Tiberius certainly did not carry in his heart. Nevertheless, the work of Š.E. presents an excellent analysis of the passages concerned, which can be used to study the reservations expressed by poets about the policy of Augustus and undoubtedly also to explore the relative freedom of speech that they possessed. It should be noted in this context that in the revised version of the *Fasti*, published after the death of Augustus, Ovid did not modify these passages.

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