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MULTIPLE INTERPRETATION OF THE OPENING AND CLOSING OF THE TEMPLE OF JANUS: A MISUNDERSTANDING OF OVID *FASTI* 1.281

BY

S.J. GREEN

The basic function of the temple of Janus as the indicator of war and peace is not in dispute, since it is explained in a variety of ancient sources. When the temple doors are open, it indicates that Rome is at war; when closed, that Rome is at peace.¹⁾ However, the reason for the custom is not so clearly defined. In particular, two passages from Ovid's *Fasti* have long appeared to confound the issue. During the poet's wide-ranging conversation with Janus in Book I, the god of January appears to give two contradictory reasons for the opening of his temple in war and its closing in peace (Ov. *Fast.* 1.121-4, 277-82):²⁾

cum libuit Pacem placidis emittere tectis
libera perpetuas ambulat illa vias:
sanguine letifero totus miscebitur orbis,
ni teneant rigidae condita Bella serae.

(‘When it is my will to send forth Peace from her tranquil dwelling, she freely walks the ways uninterrupted. But the whole world would be thrown into turmoil by deadly bloodshed, if my unyielding bars were not holding Wars imprisoned’.)

‘at cur pace lates, motisque recluderis armis?’
nec mora, quaesiti reddita causa mihi est.
‘ut populo reditus pateant ad bella profecto

1) Cf. Var. *L.* 5.165 *ius institutum a Pompilio, ut scribit in Annalibus Piso, ut sit aperta semper, nisi cum bellum sit nusquam*, Liv. 1.19.2 *Ianum . . . indicem pacis bellique fecit, apertus ut in armis esse civitatem, clausus pacatos circa omnes populos significaret*, Verg. *A.* 7.601-25, Aug. *Res Gest.* 13, Plut. *Numa* 20.1, Porph. on Hor. *Carm.* 4.15.9, Serv. *A.* 1.291, 294, Procop. 5.25.22; this signification is also implied by Flor. *Epit.* 2.34.64, Suet. *Aug.* 22, Dio 51.20.4, 53.26.5, Oros. 4.12.4.

2) The text used is that of E. Alton, D. Wormell & E. Courtney, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Fastorum Libri Sex* (Leipzig 1988). All translations are my own.

tota patet dempta ianua nostra sera.
 pace fores obdo, ne qua discedere possit;
 Caesareoque diu numine clausus ero.'

(But why do you hide in peacetime, and why will you open your doors when arms have been taken up?' Without delay, he gave me the reason which I had sought. 'When the army³) has set out to war, my doors stand wide open with bolt removed, so that the chance of return might also be open for it. I bar my doors in peacetime, so that [peace] might not leave by any means; and under the godhead of Caesar, I shall be kept closed for a long time.)

Janus appears to contradict himself: he says in the one place that his closed doors in peacetime keep *Wars* imprisoned (123-4), but later that they keep *Peace*, the opposite of Wars, imprisoned (281). Contradiction within a work of literature is not, of course, surprising in itself, especially within the *Fasti*, which deals with multiple interpretation. However, the fact that it is a *direct* contradiction from the same character in the same conversation is remarkable and, to my knowledge, unparalleled in the poem. The uniqueness of this apparent contradiction has duly troubled scholars, who have tried to account for it in several ways. One suggestion has been that 121-4 do not refer to the temple of Janus at all, but instead constitute a general statement about the god's capacity over war and peace.⁴) However, the allusion here to Ennius and Virgil, as we shall see below, strongly suggests that 121-4 refer to the physical building. Another suggestion has been that the two passages are deliberately contradictory, a reflection of the widespread uncertainty among the Romans concerning the reason for the custom.⁵) Others have resorted to emending the text of 281 in some way. Instead of the MSS *possit*, Gottingensis has suggested *possim* (the idea that it is Janus who is locked in the temple during peace) and Lange *possint* (with *Bella* understood, as in 124).

3) *Populus* in the military sense 'infantry, army' fits best here. This specific sense is detectable in titles such as *magister populi* 'master of the infantry' (Cic. *Rep.* 1.63, Var. *L.* 5.82) and the military verb *populari*; see T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome* (London 1995), 257 n. 60.

4) See R. Schilling, *Ovide—Les Fastes Tome I, Livres I-III* (Paris 1992), 102 n. 35.

5) See G. Herbert-Brown, *Ovid and the Fasti: An Historical Study* (Oxford 1994), 194-6, J.G. Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid II* (London 1929), 104.

This direct contradiction however, and the subsequent quest for justification, has only arisen because of a long-term misunderstanding of *Fast.* 1.281. I temporarily entertain it in my translation above, but it is time to revise it. All the commentators who accept the MSS *possit* take *pax* (peace) to be the implied subject of *ne qua discedere possit*.⁶) In fact, the implied subject should be *populus*, following on from *populo* in 279.⁷) A suitable translation for the line would therefore be: ‘so that the army might not be able to leave by any means’. *pax* is not appropriate from either a stylistic or thematic perspective. Firstly, from a stylistic viewpoint, Ovid has already established an abstract sense of peace in 281 with the first word *pace*, and hence the combination of abstract and personified *pax* in one sentence seems very odd. If, in special circumstances, Ovid does wish to make a striking combination of abstract and personified images of the same concept, he certainly repeats the word to make it clear; cf. e.g. *Fast.* 1.455 *nocte deae Nocti cristatus caeditur ales* (‘at night, the crested bird is sacrificed to the goddess Night’). Just as importantly, *populus* fits the context much better. In 277, the poet asks Janus the reason why his temple is opened in war and closed in peace. The question is phrased not in grand terms of *Pax* and *Bella*, but in more mundane language *pace* (‘in peacetime’) and *motis armis* (‘arms taken up’). Appropriately, Janus replies in kind. Instead of the personified imagery for war found at *Fast.* 1.124, Janus speaks in more realistic terms of *populo* . . . *ad bella profecto* (‘the army which has set out to war’). Verses 279-80 clearly imply that the *populus*, outside the temple in wartime, will at some point return back into the temple. It would therefore form a more logi-

6) See e.g. B. Nagle, *Ovid's Fasti: Roman Holidays* (Indianapolis 1995), 44 ‘In peace I shut my doors to keep peace from escaping’, Herbert-Brown (n. 5), 186 ‘I bar the doors in times of peace so that she cannot get away’, Schilling (n. 4) ad loc., P. Hardie, MD 26 (1991), 64 n. 51, M. Putnam, *Artifices of Eternity: Horace's Fourth Book of Odes* (Ithaca 1986), 277, R. Syme, *AJPh* 100 (1979), 192, F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Die Fasten Band I* (Heidelberg 1957) ad loc., J.G. Frazer, *The Fasti of Ovid I* (London 1929) ad loc.

7) Before settling for the emendation *possint* in *Fast.* 1.281, L. Lange (*Kleine Schriften aus dem Gebiete der classischen Alterthumswissenschaft* [Göttingen 1887], II.386 n. 4) simultaneously mentions and rejects *populus* as a viable subject for *possit*, in the mistaken belief that Ovid would not adopt different symbolism here to that found at *Fast.* 1.124. On the contrary, multiple interpretation is at the heart of Ovid's poem, as will become clear.

cal train of thought to understand *populus* as the subject of *ne qua discedere possit* in 281: when the soldiers return from war, it is *they* who are prevented from leaving to engage in war again.⁸⁾

populus then, not *pax*, should be understood as the subject of the *ne* clause in 281. The implied noun comes from a previous couplet, a fairly evident phenomenon in Ovid when the context makes it clear. There are two further examples in *Fast.* 1 alone; cf. 265 *contigerat* (subject is Tati, implied from *Tati* in 260), 550 *aversos* (supply *tauros* from 548). The result is that *Fast.* 1.121-4 and 279-82 offer two different explanations for the custom of Janus' temple, but they are not intrinsically contradictory in the way that the supplying of *pax* in 281 forces. *Fast.* 1.121-4 operates in personified imagery, evoking Janus in the role of prison guard, locking his doors in peacetime to restrain evil *Bella*. When Ovid adopts this imagery, he is indeed consistent. Elsewhere, in an exilic epistle to Paullus Fabius Maximus, Ovid hails Augustus as a man who has secured peace, and the symbolism used is that of wars restrained behind bars; cf. *Pont.* 1.2.124 [Augustus] *clausit et aeterna civica bella sera* ('and Augustus locked civil wars behind eternal bars').⁹⁾ The symbolism in *Fast.* 1.279-82, on the other hand, is one of Janus' temple as the precincts from which Roman soldiers set out to war through open doors, and return again with the door locked behind them after their return. This latter explanatory image appears to be evoked later by the commentator Servius; cf. *Serv. A.* 1.291 *est alia melior ratio, quod ad proelium ituri optent reversionem* ('a better reason [for the opening and closing of the temple] is so that those who are about to go to war might choose to return'), 1.294 *ideo autem Ianus belli tempore patefiebat, ut eiusdem conspectus per bellum pateret, in cuius potestate esset exitus redi-*

8) This interpretation is perhaps further supported by the presence of the verb *discedere* which, though literally meaning 'leave', is in a military context the standard verb to express 'setting/ marching off'; cf. e.g. *Caes. Civ.* 3.51, *Gal.* 6.33, *Liv.* 3.17.12, 26.42.2, 33.15.3.

9) Herbert-Brown (n. 5), 195 uses a further quotation from Janus as supposed proof that it is peace which is being locked inside the temple; cf. *Fast.* 1.253-4 '*nil mihi cum bello: pacem postesque tuebar, / et, clavem ostendens, 'haec' ait 'arma gero*' ('I have nothing to do with war: I used to safeguard peace and doors, and now', he said, showing the key, "these are the arms I bear"). However, the sentiment is a little too vague to count as evidence for the symbolism of the temple. Taken in context, it is rather a general statement about Janus' eternally peaceful nature.

tusque ('therefore [the temple of] Janus used to be open in times of war so that Janus' view of the war might be clear, in whose power were the rights to exit and return').

These two completely different explanations given here suggest that the custom was subject to multiple interpretation among the Romans. This can be seen clearly if we conduct a brief reassessment of the history of the symbolism surrounding the temple of Janus.¹⁰) The first extant viewing of the temple in symbolic terms occurs in the famous lines of Ennius' *Annales* 225-6 (Skutsch):

postquam Discordia taetra
Belli ferratos postes portasque refregit¹¹)

('After foul Discord has broken open the iron-clad posts and gates of War')

Janus' temple is viewed as a prison, and the implication would seem to be that the doors are locked during peace to restrain Discord, and that war occurs when Discord forces open the doors and breaks loose. This is certainly how it is interpreted by Virgil, who incorporates this Ennian symbolism in his epic. At an appropriate moment just before the outbreak of the war with the Latins, Virgil introduces us to the custom of the temple of Janus as indicator of war and peace (*A.* 7.607-10):

sunt geminae Belli portae (sic nomine dicunt)
religione sacrae et saevi formidine Martis;
centum aerei claudunt vectes aeternaque ferri
robora, nec custos absistit limine Ianus.

('There are twin gates of War as they call them by name, sacred by religion and the terror of fierce Mars; a hundred bolts of bronze and the eternal strength of iron secure them, and Janus the guard does not withdraw from his threshold'.)

The prison imagery is clearly defined here by the reference to

10) For previous assessments, see Herbert-Brown (n. 5), 186-96, Putnam (n. 6), 275-7. Both are limited in that they misinterpret *Fast.* 1.281 and that they do not consider any other symbolism than that involving the restraining of war or peace. Herbert-Brown's analysis in particular is conducted in terms of 'confusion' over a specific imagery, rather than in terms of dynamic symbolism.

11) This line is quoted by Hor. *S.* 1.4.60-1 and Serv. *A.* 7.622. Though it is not specifically stated, it is most definitely a reference to the temple of Janus; see O. Skutsch, *The Annals of Q. Ennius* (Oxford 1985) ad loc.

iron bolts and Janus as guard, and the words *portae Belli* are a clear echo of Ennius.¹²) The entity which is being guarded within the prison to maintain peace has been mentioned earlier by Jupiter: it is *Furor*, a fitting Virgilian substitute for the Ennian *Discordia* (*A.* 1.293-6):

dirae ferro et compagibus artis
claudentur Belli portae; Furor impius intus
saeva sedens super arma et centum vinctus aenis
post tergum nodis fremet horridus ore cruento.

(‘The gates of War, grim with iron and closely-wrought bars, will be closed. Inside unholy Frenzy, sitting on fierce arms, its hands bound behind its back by a hundred brazen knots, will roar wildly from blood-stained mouth’.)

Ennius and Virgil, therefore, concur on the symbolism of the temple of Janus as a prison. However, there is already difference of opinion as to what exactly Janus is guarding. A little later, Horace also talks symbolically about the temple of Janus in reference to Augustus’ victory over the Parthians, but the imagery he offers is somewhat different (*Carm.* 4.15.4-9, *Ep.* 2.1.255-6):

tua, Caesar, aetas
fruges et agris rettulit uberes
et signa nostro restituit Iovi
derepta Parthorum superbis
postibus et vacuum duellis
Ianum Quirini clausit . . .

(‘Your age, Caesar, has restored rich corn to the fields and returned to our Jupiter the standards which were torn down from the proud portals of the Parthians, and has closed the shrine of Janus Quirinus, devoid of wars’.)

claustraque custodem pacis cohibentia Ianum
et formidatam Parthis te principe Romam

([I prefer to talk about] the bars which confine Janus, guardian of peace, and Rome under your leadership, a source of terror to the Parthians’.)

12) Virgil alludes to the Ennian quotation specifically at *A.* 7.621-2 (*et cardine verso/ Belli ferratos rumpit Saturnia postis*), as is noticed by Serv. ad loc.

The prison imagery is discernible in the latter quotation in the words *claustra* and *custodem*. But beyond this, it is difficult to establish exactly what the significance of the closure of the temple doors is for Horace. Some take *vacuum duellis . . . Ianum* (*Carm.* 4.15.8-9) as evidence that Horace is promoting the idea that peace is kept under guard in the temple, rather than a violent force as in Ennius and Virgil.¹³) Others concentrate on *claustraque custodem pacis cohibentia* (*Ep.* 2.1.255) and suggest that Horace is saying that it is Janus who is locked up during peacetime.¹⁴) Whether we accept either or both of these interpretations, what is important is that the imagery is clearly not the same as Ennius or Virgil: Horace has taken the opportunity to experiment with the symbolism for Janus' temple as he saw fit.

It is in recognition of the dynamics of this symbolism that we should return to the two passages from Ovid's *Fasti*. The imagery at *Fast.* 1.121-4 is clearly modelled on Ennius and Virgil, except that the destructive force imprisoned in peacetime has undergone further development: it is not *Discordia*, nor *Furor*, but *Bella*. The imagery at *Fast.* 1.279-82, to which there is no extant reference before Ovid, operates on a completely different level, in terms of soldiers setting off to war through a door and later returning from war through it. This imagery may well be influenced by Roman martial practice. In simple terms, the Roman army are believed to have marched to war through an arch (*ianus*). On returning triumphant, they are believed to have come back through a gate, probably the *Porta Triumphalis*, which was thereafter closed.¹⁵) Put into the mouth of Janus, surely the most influential commentator on the subject, Ovid shows within his aetiological poem that there is no clearly-defined, standardised symbolism surrounding the temple. Instead, by giving two¹⁶) separate (but not intrinsically contra-

13) See Herbert-Brown (n. 5), 195, Putnam (n. 6), 276-7.

14) See C. Brink, *Horace on Poetry: Epistles Book II* (Cambridge 1982) ad loc.

15) Though the basic procedure is generally accepted, the specifics have long been subject to debate; for a detailed survey, see H. Versnel, *Triumphus* (Leiden 1970), 132 ff., especially 139-40, 161-2.

16) There is perhaps an allusion to a third explanation for the custom. Janus is said to have saved Rome from an attack by the Sabines, repelling them with hot water from his fountain. As a result, some believe that Janus' doors are open in times of war precisely so that the god can offer such assistance to the Romans; cf. Serv. *A.* 1.291 *alii dicunt Romulo contra Sabinos pugnante, cum in eo esset ut vinceretur*,

dictory) explanations, Ovid reminds us that the symbolism is in a state of flux, and that the custom of opening and closing the temple doors of Janus is subject to the same level of creative exegetic enquiry as any other aspect of the ambiguous god Janus.¹⁷⁾ In the wider picture, it is another manifestation of the fact that all sacred customs, ceremonies and entities were subject to multiple interpretation by the Romans, precisely because they had no dogmatic religious tradition to which to refer.¹⁸⁾

To summarise, the understanding of *populus* as the subject in Ovid *Fasti* 1.281 creates a much better sense than *pax* from both a stylistic and thematic perspective and, in the process, absolves Ovid from the charge of direct contradiction. It shows that Ovid is aware of the different symbolisms surrounding the temple of Janus and, as with other customs, keen to include them in his aetiological poem.

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calidam aquam ex eodem loco erupisse, quae fugavit exercitum Sabinorum; hinc tractum morem ut pugnaturi aperirent templum quod in eo loco fuerat constitutum, quasi ad spem pristini auxilii, Macr. 1.9.17-8 *ea re placitum ut belli tempore velut ad urbis auxilium projecto deo fores reserarentur*. Now, at the time that Ovid poses the crucial question to Janus at *Fast.* 1.277-8, Janus has just described this very act of salvation from the Sabines (*Fast.* 1.263-76), and the opening and closing of the fountain are explained in the same manner as the opening and closing of his temple doors; cf. 267 *reclusi* (277 *recluderis*), 272 *clauderet* (282 *clausus*). Is Ovid not therefore alluding to this explanation for the custom as well?

17) Janus has already given two separate reasons for both his name and his double face; cf. *Fast.* 1.101-14 (he used to be Chaos, and since Chaos derives from *χάσκειν*, so Janus derives from *hiare*, and his double face is a reminder of his former chaotic state), 115-46 (as he is the celestial doorkeeper, his name derives from *ianua*, and his double face makes it easier for him to watch those who enter and leave).

18) See e.g. J. Scheid, *Myth, cult and reality in Ovid's Fasti*, PCPhS n.s. 38 (1992), 118-31, M. Beard, *A complex of times: no more sheep on Romulus' birthday*, PCPhS n.s. 33 (1987), 1-15. For Ovid's engagement in multiple interpretation elsewhere in the poem, cf. e.g. 1.317-32 (Agonalia [7 reasons]), 3.543-674 (Anna Perenna [5 reasons]), 4.783-806 (Parilia [7 reasons]).