

CREATION

Met. I. 1–88

Lines 1–4 of *Metamorphoses* Book I comprise a short but programmatic prologue to the entire work. Ovid tells his readers that the overall theme of the poem will be *mutatas . . . formas*, changed bodies or forms. He invokes the gods to help him to compose a continuous poem, i.e., a long poem with a unifying theme (*ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen*). Although his poem will be long and continuous, it will not be a traditional epic focusing on the adventures of a single hero (Achilles, Odysseus, Aeneas). Rather, it is a collection of carefully crafted stories that range from the creation of the world to the reign of Augustus. In these first four lines Ovid aligns himself with Homer and Vergil, but also with the Hellenistic canon established by the poet Callimachus, who decried the *deducite carmen* established by epic, preferring instead the short, beautifully crafted poem. In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid will have his cake and eat it too, varying his style from epic to elegy to suit his subject matter.

At the beginning of his creation story, Ovid tells us, the world was single in appearance (*unus . . . vultus*) called *chaos*; sea, earth, and sky were not yet distinguishable (lines 5–20). In line 21 the poet introduces a creator (*deus . . . et melior natura*, a god or better nature) who begins to order a world where the elements were at war. In line 32, Ovid again alludes to a nameless creator (*quisque fuit ille deorum*, whoever it was of the gods) who begins to play an active role in forming the world into coherent parts and as *mundi fabricator*, maker of the world, begins to establish order and discourage conflict in earth, sea, and sky. This maker creates the stars and constellations. Finally man is formed. Though the poet at first leaves man's origin as uncertain (I. 76–88), he ends the account of man's creation with Prometheus as possible creator, leaving the world of philosophy for the realm of myth that will so dominate the rest of his poem. Prometheus orders man to look to heaven for guidance (lines 85–86); as McKim notes, man spends much of the rest of the *Metamorphoses* disobeying this command (*Myth against Philosophy*, 102).

This document will expire May 31, 2017.

The world is revealed as unstable and chaotic soon after lines 1–85. Ovid describes the declining ages from the peace and tranquility of the golden age, to the violence of the age of iron (I. 89–150), followed by battle of the gods and giants, the impiety of mankind, and Jupiter’s eradication by a catastrophic flood of the entire human race save for a single couple, Deucalion and Pyrrha, who repopulate the earth.

By beginning his fifteen-book epic with this description of creation, Ovid is positioning himself as part of a continuum of ancient writers who have treated this topic. His Roman model does not resemble that of the Roman poet Lucretius, whose *De Rerum Natura* is a philosophical account of the world. Rather, it is more similar to, though much longer than, the brief creation story in Vergil’s *Eclogue* VI, 31ff. Like Vergil, Ovid, as his *Metamorphoses* will affirm, is not interested in establishing a real cosmogony, but rather offers this “scientific” account of the world’s beginning in order, as some argue, to provide a contrast to “the imaginative abandon of the bulk of the *Met.*” (McKim, 97). That “bulk” consists of over two hundred mythological tales, skillfully linked by a variety of devices (for example, tales told by an internal storyteller differentiated from the narrator of the whole, or related though not necessarily sequential themes). Most depict a chaotic world of erratic, often violent actions, first by gods and then by men: a world that is in constant flux.

To underscore the world’s chaos, Ovid places the philosopher Pythagoras in Book XV, part of whose speech revisits the topic established in Book I.

Furthermore, in the final book of the poem, the instability of all forms is propounded by Pythagoras as a law of nature (XV. 252–53: *nec species sua cuique manet, rerumque nouatrix / ex aliis alias reparat natura figuras*, “and none maintains its own appearance, but the innovatress of things, / nature, restores one shape from another”). Pythagoras’s precept is phrased in a way that pointedly recalls the description of chaos at the opening of the poem, *nulli sua forma manebat*, “no part maintained its form” (I. 17). What appeared there as an aberrant precosmic state is now alleged to be the constant and universal condition of nature. As Tarrant observes, “the point is underscored

verbally by the shift in tense from *manebat* in I. 17, describing what was not yet the case, to the timeless *manet* of XV. 252” (*Chaos in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, 351).

Here, at the end of his poem then, Ovid again overturns the concept that the outcome of creation is the disappearance of chaos from the world.



© Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc.
www.BOLCHAZY.com

©2016 Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc. this sample was created
for Texas Proclamation 2017 adoption preview not for distribution.
This document will expire May 31, 2017.