

Ovid, *Fasti* 1.63-294 (translated by, and adapted notes from, A. S. Kline) [Latin text; 8 CE]

Book I: January 1: Kalends

See how Janus¹ appears first in my song
To announce a happy year for you, Germanicus.²
Two-headed Janus, source of the silently gliding year,
The only god who is able to see behind him,
Be favourable to the leaders, whose labours win
Peace for the fertile earth, peace for the seas:
Be favourable to the senate and Roman people,
And with a nod unbar the shining temples.
A prosperous day dawns: favour our thoughts and speech!
Let auspicious words be said on this auspicious day.
Let our ears be free of lawsuits then, and banish
Mad disputes now: you, malicious tongues, cease wagging!
See how the air shines with fragrant fire,
And Cilician³ grains crackle on lit hearths!
The flame beats brightly on the temple's gold,
And spreads a flickering light on the shrine's roof.
Spotless garments make their way to Tarpeian Heights,⁴
And the crowd wear the colours of the festival:
Now the new rods and axes lead, new purple glows,
And the distinctive ivory chair feels fresh weight.
Heifers that grazed the grass on Faliscan plains,⁵
Unbroken to the yoke, bow their necks to the axe.
When Jupiter watches the whole world from his hill,
Everything that he sees belongs to Rome.
Hail, day of joy, and return forever, happier still,
Worthy to be cherished by a race that rules the world.
But two-formed Janus what god shall I say you are,
Since Greece has no divinity to compare with you?
Tell me the reason, too, why you alone of all the gods
Look both at what's behind you and what's in front.
While I was musing, writing-tablets in hand,
The house seemed brighter than it was before.
Then suddenly, sacred and marvellous, Janus,
In two-headed form, showed his twin faces to my eyes.
Terrified, I felt my hair grow stiff with fear
And my heart was frozen with sudden cold.
Holding his stick in his right hand, his key in the left,
He spoke these words to me from his forward looking face:
'Learn, without fear, what you seek, poet who labours
Over the days, and remember my speech.
The ancients called me Chaos⁶ (since I am of the first world):
Note the long ages past of which I shall tell.

The clear air, and the three other elements,
Fire, water, earth, were heaped together as one.
When, through the discord of its components,
The mass dissolved, and scattered to new regions,
Flame found the heights: air took a lower place,
While earth and sea sank to the furthest depth.
Then I, who was a shapeless mass, a ball,
Took on the appearance, and noble limbs of a god.
Even now, a small sign of my once confused state,
My front and back appear just the same.
Listen to the other reason for the shape you query,
So you know of it, and know of my duties too.
Whatever you see: sky, sea, clouds, earth,
All things are begun and ended by my hand.
Care of the vast world is in my hands alone,
And mine the governance of the turning pole.
When I choose to send Peace, from tranquil houses,
Freely she walks the roads, and ceaselessly:
The whole world would drown in bloodstained slaughter,
If rigid barriers failed to hold war in check.
I sit at Heaven's Gate with the gentle Hours,⁷
Jupiter himself comes and goes at my discretion.
So I'm called Janus. Yet you'd smile at the names
The priest gives me, offering cake and meal sprinkled
With salt: on his sacrificial lips I'm Patulcius,
And then again I'm called Clusius.
So with a change of name unsophisticated antiquity
Chose to signify my changing functions.
I've explained my meaning. Now learn the reason for my shape:
Though already you partially understand it.
Every doorway has two sides, this way and that,
One facing the crowds, and the other the Lares:
And like your doorkeeper seated at the threshold,
Who watches who goes and out and who goes in,
So I the doorkeeper of the heavenly court,
Look towards both east and west at once.
You see Hecate's⁸ faces turned in three directions,
To guard the crossroads branching several ways:
And I, lest I lose time twisting my neck around,
Am free to look both ways without moving.'⁷
So he spoke, and promised by a look,
That he'd not begrudge it if I asked for more.
I gained courage and thanked the god fearlessly,
And spoke these few words, gazing at the ground:
'Tell me why the new-year begins with cold,
When it would be better started in the spring?'

Then all's in flower, then time renews its youth,
And the new buds swell on the fertile vines:
The trees are covered in newly formed leaves,
And grass springs from the surface of the soil:
Birds delight the warm air with their melodies,
And the herds frisk and gambol in the fields.
Then the sun's sweet, and brings the swallow, unseen,
To build her clay nest under the highest roof beam.
Then the land's cultivated, renewed by the plough.
That time rightly should have been called New Year.'
I said all this, questioning: he answered briefly
And swiftly, casting his words in twin verses:
'Midwinter's the first of the new sun, last of the old:
Phoebus⁹ and the year have the same inception.'
Then I asked why the first day wasn't free
Of litigation. 'Know the cause,' said Janus,
'I assigned the nascent time to business affairs,
Lest by its omen the whole year should be idle.
For that reason everyone merely toys with their skills,
And does no more than give witness to their work.'
Next I said: 'Why, while I placate other gods, Janus,
Do I bring the wine and incense first to you?'
He replied: 'So that through me, who guard the threshold,
You can have access to whichever god you please.'
'But, why are joyful words spoken on the Kalends,
And why do we give and receive good wishes?'
Then leaning on the staff he gripped in his right hand,
He answered: 'Omens attend upon beginnings.'
Anxious, your ears are alert at the first word,
And the augur interprets the first bird that he sees.
When the temples and ears of the gods are open,
The tongue speaks no idle prayer, words have weight.'
Janus ended. Maintaining only a short silence
I followed his final words with my own:
'What do the gifts of dates and dried figs mean',
I said, 'And the honey glistening in a snow-white jar?'
'For the omen,' he said, 'so that events match the savour,
So the course of the year might be sweet as its start.'
'I see why sweet things are given. Explain the reason
For gifts of money, so I mistake no part of your festival.'
He laughed and said: 'How little you know of your age,
If you think that honey's sweeter to it than gold!
I've hardly seen anyone, even in Saturn's reign,
Who in his heart didn't find money sweet.
Love of it grew with time, and is now at its height,
Since it would be hard put to increase much further.

Wealth is valued more highly now, than in those times
When people were poor, and Rome was new,
When a small hut held Romulus,¹⁰ son of Mars,
And reeds from the river made a scanty bed.
Jupiter complete could barely stand in his low shrine,
And the lightning bolt in his right hand was of clay.
They decorated the Capitol with leaves, not gems,
And the senators grazed their sheep themselves.
There was no shame in taking one's rest on straw,
And pillowing one's head on the cut hay.
Cincinnatus¹¹ left the plough to judge the people,
And the slightest use of silver plate was forbidden.
But ever since Fortune, here, has raised her head,
And Rome has brushed the heavens with her brow,
Wealth has increased, and the frantic lust for riches,
So that those who possess the most seek for more.
They seek to spend, compete to acquire what's spent,
And so their alternating vices are nourished.
Like one whose belly is swollen with dropsy
The more they drink, they thirstier they become.
Wealth is the value now: riches bring honours,
Friendship too: everywhere the poor are hidden.
And you still ask me if gold's useful in augury,
And why old money's a delight in our hands?
Once men gave bronze, now gold grants better omens,
Old money, conquered, gives way to the new.
We too delight in golden temples, however much
We approve the antique: such splendour suits a god.
We praise the past, but experience our own times:
Yet both are ways worthy of being cultivated.'
He ended his statement. But again calmly, as before,
I spoke these words to the god who holds the key.
'Indeed I've learned much: but why is there a ship's figure
On one side of the copper *as*, a twin shape on the other?'
'You might have recognised me in the double-image',
He said, 'if length of days had not worn the coin away.
The reason for the ship is that the god of the sickle
Wandering the globe, by ship, reached the Tuscan river.
I remember how Saturn¹² was welcomed in this land:
Driven by Jupiter from the celestial regions.
From that day the people kept the title, Saturnian,
And the land was Latium, from the god's hiding (*latente*) there.
But a pious posterity stamped a ship on the coin,
To commemorate the new god's arrival.
I myself inhabited the ground on the left
Passed by sandy Tiber's gentle waves.

Here, where Rome is now, uncut forest thrived,
And all this was pasture for scattered cattle.
My citadel was the hill the people of this age
Call by my name, dubbing it the Janiculum.
I reigned then, when earth could bear the gods,
And divinities mingled in mortal places.
Justice¹³ had not yet fled from human sin,
(She was the last deity to leave the earth),
Shame without force, instead of fear, ruled the people,
And it was no effort to expound the law to the lawful.
I'd nothing to do with war: I guarded peace and doorways,
And this,' he said, showing his key, 'was my weapon.'
The god closed his lips. Then I opened mine,
Eliciting with my voice the voice of the god:
'Since there are so many archways, why do you stand
Sacredly in one, here whee your temple adjoins two *fora*?
Stroking the beard falling on his chest with his hand,
He at once retold the warlike acts of Oebalian Tatius,¹⁴
And how the treacherous keeper, Tarpeia, bribed with bracelets,
Led the silent Sabines to the heights of the citadel.
'Then,' he said, 'a steep slope, the one by which you
Now descend, led to the valleys and the *fora*.
Even now the enemy had reached the gate, from which
Saturn's envious daughter, Juno, had removed the bars.
Fearing to engage in battle with so powerful a goddess,
I cunningly employed an example of my own art,
And by my power I opened the mouths of the springs,
And suddenly let loose the pent-up waters:
But first I threw sulphur into the watery channels,
So boiling liquid would close off that path to Tatius.
This action performed and the Sabines repulsed,
The place took on its secure aspect as before.
An altar to me was raised, linked to a little shrine:
Here the grain and cake is burnt in its flames'
'But why hide in peace, and open your gates in war?'
He swiftly gave me the answer that I sought:
'My unbarred gate stands open wide, so that when
The people go to war the return path's open too.'
I bar it in peacetime so peace cannot depart:
And by Caesar's will I shall be long closed.'
He spoke, and raising his eyes that looked both ways,
He surveyed whatever existed in the whole world.
There was peace, and already a cause of triumph, Germanicus,
The Rhine had yielded her waters up in submission to you.
Janus, make peace and the agents of peace eternal,
And grant the author may never abandon his work.

Now for what I've learned from the calendar itself:
The senate dedicated two temples on this day.
The island the river surrounds with divided waters,
Received Aesculapius, whom Coronis bore to Apollo.
Jupiter too shares it: one place holds both, and the temples
Of the mighty grandfather and the grandson are joined.

¹ The Roman two-headed god of doorways and beginnings, equivalent to the Hindu elephant god Ganesh. The Janus mask is often depicted with one melancholy and one smiling face. The first month of the year in the Julian calendar was named for him, January (*Ianuaris*).

² Germanicus (15 BCE – 19 CE) was the son of the elder Drusus, grandson of Antony, and adopted (4 CE) son of the emperor Tiberius, and husband of Agrippina (daughter of Agrippa, granddaughter of Augustus). Ovid re-dedicated the *Fasti* to him after Augustus's death.

³ The southeast coastal region of Asia Minor, incorporated into the Empire from 67BC when Pompey suppressed the endemic piracy of the coastal area. Famous for its saffron, derived from crocus flowers.

⁴ The Tarpeian Heights were the cliff-edge in Rome from which certain criminals (murderers and traitors) were thrown. Ovid calls the whole Capitoline Hill Tarpeian, but strictly it applied to the western cliff, the Tarpeian Rock, named from Spurius Tarpeius who commanded the citadel in the Sabine War or his daughter Tarpeia who betrayed the citadel to the Sabines or from Lucius Tarpeius whom Romulus caused to be hurled from the rock.

⁵ Falerii is an Etruscan city on the bank of the Tiber north-west of Rome, beyond Mount Soracte, captured by Rome in 241BC. It was famous for its orchards, pastures and cattle.

⁶ The source and state of the Universe at its creation.

⁷ The Hours are goddesses of time: variously the year, seasons and the hours of the day.

⁸ A Thracian goddess of witches; three-faced guardian of the crossroads.

⁹ A familiar name for Apollo the sun-god, and so the sun itself.

¹⁰ The mythical founder of Rome his twin brother Remus.

¹¹ Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, a Roman statesman of the 5th century BC, who was made dictator to save a legion besieged by a hostile Italian tribe. After his victory he returned to his farm, despite pleas that he remain. His rejection of autocratic rule made him a symbol of traditional Roman values.

¹² Son of Earth and Heaven (Uranus) ruler of the universe in the Golden Age. Was given refuge in Latium, a county in Central Italy.

¹³ The goddess of Justice.

¹⁴ Oelous was King of Sparta, from whom the Sabines claimed descent. Tatius was a king of the Sabines who fought against Romulus, but afterwards made peace and ruled jointly with him.