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Creation in Ovid and the Latin Poets of Late Antiquity

The influence of Ovid is widespread in the poetry of Late Antiquity. In this paper I study the reception of the accounts of creation in the *Metamorphoses* by the fifth-century Christian poets who take as their subject the biblical creation story. Already in the third decade of the century Claudius Marius Victorius begins his biblical epic on Genesis by evoking and challenging the start of Ovid's creation story (*Met.* 1.5-6). By comparison later in the century the author of the *Metrum in Genesin* avoids polemical correction of the classical poet. His version of creation and the early history of humankind is Ovidian in inspiration, structured by references to the early sections of the *Metamorphoses*.

Three trends emerge in the Ovidianization of the biblical creation story in fifth-century poetry: the tendency to describe the creation of man as a metamorphosis (Claudius Marius Victorius, Dracontius); the increasing taxonomic exhaustivity of the description of the newly created world (*Metrum in Genesin*, Dracontius; cf. Ovid, *Met.* 1.43-44); and the adoption of the warring opposites of Ovid's chaos (*Met.* 1.19-20) as a preferred image of the benign tension that secures harmony in the divinely created world (Prosper, Orientius, Claudius Marius Victorius). In the confused conditions of early fifth-century Gaul Ovid's vision of contending opposites, reinterpreted as a model of harmony and peace, had a special appeal. Christian authors interpret such a *concordia discors* as a model of order in the political, moral, psychological, and finally poetic realms, as well as in the universe as a whole.

In all these cases poets not only give a Christian interpretation of Ovid's text but also subject the Bible to an *interpretatio Ovidiana*. This employment of the Bible and classical poetry as sources of mutual illumination is more common with Virgil. It marks the fullest expression of Christian exegetical engagement with classical poetic texts and is evidence of the special status Ovid's account of creation enjoyed in early Christian literature.