



[Ovid, *Metamorphoses* I.89-112](#)

The Golden Age of Saturn

Name of the author: Ovid

Date: 1st BCE to 1st CE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: *Metamorphoses*

Reference:

I.89-112

Commentary:

Ovid's utopian description of the Saturnian Golden Age forms part of a larger account in the first book of the *Metamorphoses* of the mythic origins of the world and the various ages of man. Saturn's era is one that is remembered here and elsewhere (e.g. Virgil, *Eclogue* IV.1-63) as without war and conflict, and naturally abundant, the earth providing plentiful natural bounty of her own accord, rather than through subjection to man having toiled on the land. Ovid, following Hesiod's pattern in his *Works and Days* (109-201), relays four ages of man – gold, silver, bronze, and iron – which gradually see the degeneration of mankind (the decline in worth of the metals being representative of this), until Jupiter intervenes by destroying man and starting a new era where law, order, and physical labour replace the idyllic, carefree lifestyle of Saturn's reign.

The Saturnian age is defined in terms of absence, and in this sense parallels the primordial age of chaos which preceded it (I.1-88). While the chaotic beginning of the cosmos had no sun, no moon, no earth, and no ocean, the Golden Age has no law, no punishment, no judges, no soldiers, no armour or city defences, and no hard labour. Essentially, the traditional notion of chaos transforming into order is reversed. Out of all Ovid's descriptions of the ages, the Golden Age receives the most attention, consisting of 24 verses, compared to only 12 for the silver age, and under 3 for the bronze. Finally, the age of iron is described in stark contrast to the gold, filled with materialistic greed, violence between men, and strenuous agricultural work (I.113-150). As is noted, for example, by Stephen Wheeler, Ovid's description of the transition through the ages is less one of gradual metamorphosis and more a dramatic disparity between the peace and harmony of the age of gold and the moral uproar of the age of iron (Stephen Wheeler, *Narrative Dynamics in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, p. 23)

This passage is perhaps most interesting, however, when read alongside other Roman literature which idealises the Saturnian Golden Age, particularly in relation to the idea that Octavian would rectify the present state of unrest and chaos and usher in a new Golden Age of peace and prosperity. See, for example, *Aeneid* VI.791-797, 852, where Augustus is described as reviving the age of Saturn, yet with a slight modification – the instigation of laws and social order. Augustus's Golden Age, then, combines the rich abundance of Saturn's reign, with the structured organisation of Jupiter's.

As has recently been articulated by Gareth Williams, the question of whether Ovid himself was pro or anti-Augustan, or completely indifferent when writing the *Metamorphoses*, has been discussed at length by scholars. Augustus features specifically at highly significant points in the narrative of the poem in the first and last books, but as Williams argues, the ideals that surrounded him can be seen to undergird the entire text (Gareth Williams, "The *Metamorphoses*: Politics and Narrative," p. 154). The more nuanced concept of Augustus as an *idea* embodying Roman government has been put forward by the likes of Duncan Kennedy ("'Augustan' and 'Anti-Augustan,'" p. 35), and can certainly be applied to this passage, in which the hope of Augustus's new Golden Age identifies with Ovid's tranquil description of Saturn's rule, yet at the same time promises to improve upon it with the introduction of law and order, facilitating improved morality.



Keywords in the original language:

- [aurea aetas](#)
- [gens](#)
- [iudex](#)
- [lex](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [abundance](#)
- [bounty](#)
- [Golden Age](#)
- [law](#)
- [Saturn](#)

Bibliographical references: Wheeler, Stephen M., [Narrative Dynamics in Ovid's Metamorphoses](#) (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 2000)

Kennedy, Duncan F., "[Augustan' and 'Anti-Augustan': Reflection on Terms of Reference](#)", in Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus (ed. Powell, Anton; Bristol: Classical Press, 1992), 26-58

Williams, Gareth D., "[The Metamorphoses: Politics and Narrative](#)", in A Companion to Ovid (ed. Knox, Peter E.; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 154-169

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