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Book Author(s): Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos

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INTRODUCTION

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I. Ovid and His Times

Ovid, or (to give him his full Roman name) Publius Ovidius Naso, was born in 43 BCE to a prominent equestrian family in Sulmo (modern Sulmona), a small town about 140 km east of Rome. He died in banishment, a resident of Tomi on the Black Sea, in 17 CE. Ovid was one of the most prolific authors of his day, as well as one of the most controversial.¹ He had always been constitutionally unable to write anything in prose — or so he claims in his autobiography (composed, of course, in verse). Whatever flowed from his pen was in metre, even after his father had told him to put an end to such nonsense:

saepe pater dixit 'studium quid inutile temptas?

Maeonides² nullas ipse reliquit opes'.

motus eram dictis, totoque Helicone³ relicto

scribere temptabam verba soluta modis.

sponte sua carmen numeros veniebat ad aptos,

et quod temptabam dicere versus erat.

(*Trist.* 4.10.21–26)

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- 1 Introductions to Ovid abound. See e.g. Mack (1988), Holzberg (2002), Fantham (2004), Volk (2010), Liveley (2011). There are also three recent 'companions' to Ovid, i.e. collections of papers designed to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the poet and his works. See Hardie (2002b) (by far the best and most affordable), Weiden Boyd (2000) and Knox (2009).
 - 2 *Maeonides* means 'a native of Maeonia', a region in Asia Minor, from which Homer was in antiquity believed to have hailed: hence *Maeonides* = Homer.
 - 3 Mount Helicon in Boeotia is said to be the place where the Muses do dwell; hence *toto Helicone relicto* = 'all Helicon abandoned' = 'having abandoned the writing of poetry'.

My father often said, 'Why try a useless
 Vocation? Even Homer left no wealth'.
 So I obeyed, all Helicon abandoned,
 And tried to write in prose that did not scan.
 But poetry in metre came unbidden,
 And what I tried to write in verses ran.
 (tr. Melville)

Students of Latin may well be familiar with Naso senior's banausic attitude: classics graduates, some wrongly assume, have similarly dismal career prospects. But eventually Ovid would shrug off paternal disapproval in pursuit of his passion. After dutifully filling certain minor offices, he chose not to go on to the quaestorship, thereby definitively renouncing all ambition for a senatorial career. In his case, the outcome was an *oeuvre* for the ages. For quick orientation, here is a time-line with the basics:⁴

Time-line	Historical Events	Ovid's Biography	Literary History
50s BCE			Catullus, Lucretius
44	Julius Caesar murdered		
43	Cicero murdered	Ovid born	
30s			[Gallus <i>Amores</i> 1–4 (lost)], Horace <i>Epodes</i>
35			Virgil <i>Eclogues</i> Horace <i>Satires</i> 1
31	Battle of Actium		
29			Virgil <i>Georgics</i>
27	Octavian becomes 'Augustus'		

4 A good way to get a sense of his life and career is to read his highly spun autobiography *Trist.* 4.10, which begins with a charming couplet addressed to you: *Ille ego qui fuerim, tenerorum lusor amorum, | quem legis, ut noris, accipe posteritas ...* ('That you may know who I was, I that playful poet of tender love whom you read, hear my words, you of times to come ...')

Time-line	Historical Events	Ovid's Biography	Literary History
Early 20s			Livy 1–10
20s			Propertius 1–3, Tibullus 1, Horace <i>Odes</i> 1–3, <i>Epistles</i> 1
19			Virgil <i>Aeneid</i> , Tibullus 1–2
18	<i>Leges Iuliae</i> (initial Augustan marriage legislation)		
17	Secular Games; Augustus adopts Gaius and Lucius		Horace <i>Carmen Saeculare</i>
16			Propertius 4
10s–0s		<i>Amores</i> 1–3, <i>Heroides</i> , <i>Medicamina faciei femineae</i> , <i>Medea</i> (a lost tragedy)	Horace <i>Ars Poetica</i> , <i>Epistles</i> 2, <i>Odes</i> 4
2 BCE		<i>Ars Amatoria</i> 1–2	
1 CE	Birth of Jesus		
2		<i>Ars Amatoria</i> 3 and <i>Remedia Amoris</i>	
4	Augustus adopts Tiberius		
8	Scandal at court; Augustus relegates Ovid to Tomi on the Black Sea	Finished just before the relegation (?): <i>Metamorphoses</i> 1–15, <i>Fasti</i> 1–6	
8–17		<i>Tristia</i> 1–5, <i>Epistulae ex Ponto</i> 1–4, <i>Ibis</i> , <i>Double Heroides</i>	
14	Augustus dies; Tiberius accedes		
10s			Manilius <i>Astronomica</i>
17 (?)		Ovid dies	Livy dies

Ovid was born when the Republic, the oligarchic system of government that had ruled Rome for centuries, was in its death throes. He was a teenager at the time of the Battle of Actium, the final showdown between Mark Antony and Octavian that saw the latter emerge victorious, become the first *princeps*, and eventually take the honorific title 'Augustus' by which he is better known to posterity. Unlike other major poets of the so-called 'Augustan Age' — Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus — Ovid never experienced a fully functional form of republican government, the *libera res publica* in whose cause figures like Cato and even Cicero ultimately died. There is another important difference between Ovid and most of the other major Augustan poets: he did not have a 'patron-friend', such as Maecenas (a close adviser of the *princeps* who, in the 30s, 'befriended' Virgil, Horace and Propertius) or Messalla, the amateur poet and power-politician to whom Tibullus dedicates his poetry. Ovid came from a prominent family and was financially self-sufficient: this left him free — or so he must have thought — to let rip his insouciant imagination.

A consummate urbanite, Ovid enjoyed himself and was an immensely popular figure in the fashionable society of Augustan Rome. He was more than happy to endorse the myth that the founding hero Aeneas and thus the city itself had Venus in their DNA (just spell Roma backwards!). For him Rome was first and foremost the city of Love and Sex and his (early) verse reads like an ancient version of 'Sex and the City'.

Eventually, though, Ovid ran afoul of the regime. In 8 CE, when he was fifty years old, Ovid was implicated in a lurid court scandal that also involved Augustus' niece Julia and was relegated by the emperor to Tomi, a town on the Black Sea (the sea-port Constanța in present-day Romania).⁵ The reasons, so Ovid himself tells us, were a 'poem and a mistake' (*carmen et error*, *Trist.* 2.207). He goes on to identify the poem as the *Ars Amatoria* — which had, however, been published a full ten years earlier — but declines to elaborate on the 'mistake', on the grounds

5 Technically speaking, Ovid suffered the punishment of *relegatio* ('deportation') rather than the more severe penalty of *exilium* ('exile') — the poet himself stresses the distinction at *Trist.* 2.137. This meant that Ovid retained citizenship and many of the rights that went with it, and his property was not confiscated. His (third) wife Fabia did not accompany him to Tomi, but seems to have remained faithful to him.

that it would be too painful for Augustus. He maintained this reticent pose for the rest of his life, so what the *error* was is now anybody's guess (and many have been made). In any event, despite Ovid's pleas the hoped-for recall never came, even after the death of Augustus, and he was forced to pine away the rest of his life far from his beloved Rome. He characterizes Tomi as a primitive and dreary town, located in the middle of nowhere, even though archaeological evidence suggests that it was a pleasant seaside resort. And while his poetry continued to flow, it did so in a very different vein from the light-hearted exuberance that characterizes his earlier 'Roman' output; the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* explore the potential of the elegiac distich (a verse-form consisting of a six-foot hexameter and a five-foot pentameter in alternation: the metre of mourning as well as love) to articulate grief. But on his career trajectory from *eros* to exile, Ovid made forays into non-elegiac genres: tragedy (his lost play *Medea*) and, of course, epic. In the following section we will explore Ovid's playful encoding, in a range of texts, of his longstanding epic ambition and its final realization in the *Metamorphoses*.

