

INTRODUCTION TO OVID (43 BC-17 CE)

Publius Ovidius Naso, or Ovid as he is generally known, was born in Sulmo, in central Italy. His family was of equestrian rank (the second highest income class in Roman society, below only the senatorial class). Ovid was given the standard education for a young man of his rank and was groomed for a career in law. He held a couple of minor posts, but then turned to poetry, for which (he tells us) he had displayed a natural talent since youth. He soon won the patronage of M. Valerius **Messalla** Corvinus (64 BCE - 8 CE), a patrician who had won fame as an orator, soldier, and linguist and was a well-known patron of the arts.

Nota Bene: Much of Ovid's biography is based on interpretations of his poetry and ancient testimony of dubious reliability. In general, the biographies of all ancient authors should be approached critically.

Ovid was not a part, therefore, of the 'inner circle' of Augustan poets such as Vergil and Horace who were associated with Maecenas. He did become part of the younger, 'fast' crowd at Rome, however, the most prominent member of which was the emperor's daughter, Julia (see below).



Ovid's poetic output is quite varied. In addition to the *Metamorphoses*, he composed collections of sophisticated love elegies (the *Amores*), a collection of fictitious letters (in verse) written by famous women from ancient myth (*Heroides*), a poetic handbook on the use of cosmetics (*Medicamina faciei femineae*, a tragedy (*Medea*, now lost, but much praised in antiquity), the *Ars Amatoria* (usually called *The Art of Love* among English writers, but in reality a technical handbook [in verse] on how to commit adultery [amor], and a poetic account of the Roman religious calendar (*Fasti*), describing the various annual rites, their origins, and the myths with which they were associated. Despite the variety of topics and genres evident in Ovid's works, there are certain elements that characterize his oeuvre as a whole (note, e.g., his interest in love themes and in the emotional distress of women wronged); above all, his works are marked by wit, sophistication, and irreverence, the latter often taking a particularly subtle form of parody. For example the *Ars Amatoria* can be read as indirect mockery of Vergil's *Georgics*: where Vergil celebrates the life of the country and traditional Roman morality by composing a verse handbook on farming, Ovid composes a similar work celebrating the sophisticated life of the young man-about-town and the pursuit of *amor*.

In 8 CE, at the height of his career, Ovid was suddenly banished to Tomi on the northwest shore of the Black Sea. This would have been a devastating blow for any Roman, but was particularly distressing for Ovid, who found himself separated from his books, his circle of friends and fellow literati, and from the sophisticated society of Rome in which he was at home. His final works (*Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*) are a series of laments addressed to Augustus from the lonely isolation of exile: Ovid begs the emperor's forgiveness at length, but is quite vague regarding the cause of his banishment. His most specific reference (*Tr.* 4.1099) mentions 'a poem and a mistake' (*carmen et error*) but expressly denies that he had committed any crime (*scelus*).

WORKS

Amores — “The Loves”: 1st edition ca. 20 BCE; 2nd edition shortly before the publication of *Ars Amatoria*

Heroides — “The Heroines”: Composed between the first and second edition of *Amores*

Ars Amatoria — “The Art of Love”: Books 1-2: not before 1 BCE; the third book is later in date.

Medicamina faciei femineae — “Womens' Makeup”: Before the third book of *Ars Amatoria*

Medea — A tragedy, now lost; date unknown.

Remedia Amoris — “Cures for Love”: 1 CE

Metamorphoses — “Transformations”: after 2 CE; an epic poem in fifteen books that describes the creation and history of the world down to the apotheosis of Julius Caesar through a series of interrelated transformations, many of which have erotic motivations. The work is remarkable for focusing not on the adventures of single hero, but rather the process of transformation, as the organizing principle of the work.

For an outline of the entire work, see <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/~jfarrell/courses/spring96/myth/metstruc.html>

Fasti — “Calendars”: After 2 CE

Tristia — “Sorrows”: 9 CE

Ibis – invective against his detractors: 11-12 CE

Epistulae ex Ponto: “Letters from Pontus”: Books 1-3: 13 CE; Book 4 posthumously.

OVID'S LIFE

Date	Vergil's Life	Contemporary Events
43 BCE, Mar. 20	Ovid born at Sulmo	Pompey and Crassus consuls; restoration of tribunician powers. Frequent wars in East.
67-64		Pompey routs pirates and then Mithridates; peace throughout Mediterranean
63	Vergil living in Cremona	Cicero consul; Catiline's conspiracy. Birth of C. Octavius (later Augustus)
60	Vergil studying in Cremona	Formation of the 'First Triumvirate': Caesar, Pompey and Crassus.
59		Caesar's failed consul
58		Caesar begins Gallic campaigns
55		Pompey and Crassus are consuls again
54	Vergil completes school in Cremona; goes to Milan.	Crassus sets out for Parthia; Caesar in Britain
53	Vergil goes to Rome for legal training.	Crassus killed at Carrhae; loses standards.
52-50	Vergil gradually rejects other vocations, devotes self exclusively to poetry.	Urban unrest; tension between Pompey and Caesar moves Rome to brink of civil war.
49	Vergil in Epicurean society at Cumae, writing	Caesar crosses the Rubicon, rapidly drives Pompey out of Italy
48-45		Caesar defeats Pompeian forces.
44		Caesar assassinated; by his will C. Octavius adopted (hence Octavian)
42		Philippi: Brutus and Cassius, the assassins, defeated by M. Antonius and Octavian
41	Vergil begins <i>Eclogues</i> : I and IX deal with farmers facing confiscation.	Octavian confiscates much of the land around Cremona for his veterans.
39-38	<i>Eclogues</i> completed; <i>Georgics</i> started	M. Antonius marries Octavia, Octavian's sister
31	<i>Georgics</i> completed; <i>Aeneid</i> started	Octavian and Agrippa defeat Antonius and Cleopatra at Actium.
27		Octavian assumes the name Augustus. First 'constitutional settlement'
19	Having completed most of the <i>Aeneid</i> , Vergil sets sail for Greece to devote three years to revision. But Augustus persuades him to return to Italy. Ill on his return trip, Vergil dies after landing at Brindisi, Sept. 21.	Augustus travels in East to secure empire, esp. against the Parthians. On the death of Vergil, publication of the <i>Aeneid</i> entrusted to Vergil's friends, talented poets named Varius and Tucca.
17	<i>Aeneid</i> probably published as part of Augustus' celebrations	Secular games are held; Horace, friend of Vergil, commissioned to write the <i>Carmen Saeculare</i> .