

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## Amores (16 B.C.)

Ovid.

### OVERVIEW

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 B.C.- 17 AD) was born in Sulmo to an important equestrian family—*equestrian* meaning just below the highest patrician rank. He was sent to Rome for his education—as were his social and intellectual peers—and studied Rhetoric, as a prelude to the study and practice of law. (This educational pathway, leading toward Law, and beyond that toward politics, was generally expected of the aspiring young gentleman learning in Rome.) For some reason, perhaps the shocking death of his brother at age twenty, Ovid decided to stick with his initial instinct, and to give himself unreservedly to poetry. At this point Ovid went to Athens to study, and while studying there travelled to Asia Minor and Sicily. From 29 B.C.-25 B.C. Ovid returned to Rome to devote himself to poetry. It was at this period that he too—as was also part of the expected pattern-- found his patron. This time it was not the wealthy and magnanimous Maecenas, who was to become the central figure of Augustus' literary circle, but Marcus Corvinus, who was long a defender of the Roman Republic against Augustus, and who found himself moving toward Augustus, as the tide of history swept in that direction. Thus Ovid too came ultimately under the supportive umbrella of the Emperor's largesse, and left us one more instance of the way money and connections paved the way to literary success.

**Poetry.** From this point on Ovid not only determined, but had the means to give, his life to poetry. To shorten the discussion, he was mentally preparing to write what would become a world famous series of erotic-social works—the *Heroides* (15 B.C.), the *Amores* (16 B.C.), the *Ars Amatoria* (10 B.C.), the *Metamorphoses* (starting 2 A.D.)—when a devastating blow of fate assaulted him. In the year 8 A.D. Ovid was banished--*relegated*-- from Rome by the Emperor Augustus, and sent to the distant city of Tomi, on the Black Sea. Even though relegation was different from exile, and gave a few more local privileges—he kept his books-- this life confinement to a remote sea port was a serious exile for any Roman, let alone for an urban sophisticate accustomed to the cultural interactions of the metropolis. (Rome was at this point becoming a thrilling center of literary and architectural growth.)

**Story.** The *Amores* (16 B.C.) is Ovid's first published volume of poetry; it opens aggressively onto the themes of love and war, humor, the dignity and durability of poetry; its vehicle is the elegiac couplet, a special darling of Roman love poetry, a cunning blend of a single hexameter line followed by a single pentameter line; a couplet, if ever there was one, in which closure and elegance blend, repeatable to the end of time, and thus reinforcing the claim of the poet, Ovid in this case, to be one of the immortals—echoing the keynote of Shakespeare's sonnets, and picking up that fear of being forgotten which has long haunted the greatest of poets.

*I want wild love, to shatter sluggard slumber,  
Mine not the only weight the blankets bear.  
Then clear the decks and let my girl undo me.  
If one can do it; if not, I'll take a pair. (2, 10).*

In three books the poet of the *Amores* launches into an account of a love affair he is both having and longs for, with an upper class Roman lady—presumably someone above Ovid's class. (She is very much the *belle dame sans merci*, in their relationship, and opinions differ greatly as to whether she was a 'real person'). We soon see with what military type campaign strategy the lover plans his assault on Corinna. It is truly a military spirit, win or lose, that comes to the fore. We get a glimpse of the lover's attack around a party dinner table:

*Your husband will be there at the same dinner—  
I wish your husband his last meal tonight.*

Across the table, commands the poet to Corinna, *watch for my signals*—brush my shoe, smile mockingly at *him*, carefully avoiding his kisses—

*When, darling, what I do or say gives pleasure,  
Keep turning to and fro the ring you wear.  
When you wish well-earned curses on your husband,  
Lay your hand on the table, as in prayer.*

The poet's frustrated addresses to his woman reach their most exacerbating level when he is kept by circumstances from visiting with the lady, especially from visiting her in the privacy of her boudoir. A characteristic tussle takes place around the lady's main gate, which her husband demands should be kept barred and chained shut, but through which the desperate suitor is determined to squeeze.

He cries to the porter:

*I've tried—tried everything—but I can't move you  
With prayers or threats; the door's less hard than you.  
You are not fit to guard a lovely lady  
To be a prison warder is your due.*

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The overall argument of the *Amores*, to the extent it disciplines itself to a concept, is this: female beauty is irresistible, the lover must put his identity and honor on of the line, in order to compete worthily, and the pleasure in the victorious end of the battle makes it all worth while. What is that end? Is it male conquest, is it simply intercourse, or is it something like victory for the community of lovers and poets? Ovid is not precisely asking these questions, but is asking the question why we do not work for the pleasure principle in society, do what we can to enjoy ourselves? Had Ovid been more 'philosophical,' and asked more, he might have asked: how can we be free of the blockades we set up between ourselves and our pleasure? He could have taken the present verbal drama farther than he did, and raised more important questions about the life-practice put in play by the reflections awakened in the *Amores*. He will go deeper into this quest in his masterpiece the *Metamorphoses* (8 AD).

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The structure of Books Two and Three of the *Amores*, after Ovid has surveyed the lay of the land in Book One, is episodic. We have gotten to know the poet—his military passion, his occasional abjection, his willingness to take it as it comes—and we will get to know the ins and outs of his moods, strategies, hopes—until in the end we see him bid goodbye to his lover and to his own addiction to the elegiac couplet. In the course of this unravelling tale of one lover's love life we will hear Ovid confess his helpless addiction to beautiful women, bemoan the death of Corinna's parrot--

Her parrot, flying mimic from the Indies,  
Is dead Come every bird, come flocking round--

moan elegantly at the abortion Corinna is currently undertaking, on their love child; dilate on the topic of adultery, which will probably be the source of his own downfall; agonize over a bad case of erectile dysfunction, which leaves him wondering, at age twenty- five, whether he has a future in the bedroom; sidle into too much knowledge, and retreat over the awareness of Corinna's ultimate faithlessness, the defection of a former lover who is as selfish as he is.

## THEMES

**Love** Love is of course the sweeping emotion that drives the entire *Amores*, from the closed elegiacs to the preoccupation with overcoming the resistance of the lover. The Roman lyric—in Ovid as well as Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius; all virtually contemporaries of the dramatic new Augustan world—was devoted to the cult of eros/cupid—not to the spiritual cult of woman the savior, but to the seductive cult of Venus. Worth remembering: in Roman polytheism a widely worshipped deity like Venus (mother of Cupid, by Mercury) was readily experienced as a living part of nature. The spiritual was not sharply distinct from the terrestrial.

### **War**

Lovers are soldiers, Atticus. Believe me.  
Lovers are soldiers. Cupid has his corps.  
The age that's fit for fighting's fine for Venus.  
Old men are shamed in loving, shamed in war.

For Ovid as for many of his fellow citizens military virtues—as well as the military life style—are acclaimed. Soldiers hold themselves to the highest standards of discipline, order, and fight-readiness; thus the comparison between lovers and soldiers is not tongue in cheek, but exhortative, urging lovers to take their challenges seriously.

**Irony** In 1.3 Ovid raises the question, a theme throughout, of his sincerity and 'attitude.' Most of 1.3 is the poet's seemingly frank self-assessment. He admits to being of a modest and thrifty background, and insists on the integrity of his nature and his life, but he assures his beloved that their two names, joined immortally in his poetry, will be entwined forever. This theme—'that the whole world will ever hymn my name'—is or is implicit throughout the *Amores*, and yet there is so much playfulness and wit, throughout the poem, that we incline to think of the work as artifice rather than straight statement.