

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph. D.

## **Heroides** (29-13 B.C.E.)

Ovid (43 B.C.E.-18 C.E.)

### **Overview**

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 B.C.E.- 18.C.E.) 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.E.-25 B.C.E. 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.

**Ovid's exile.** 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 highly popular series of works—the *Heroides*, the *Amores*, the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Metamorphoses*—when a devastating blow of fate assaulted him. In the year 8 A.D. Ovid was banished from Rome by the Emperor Augustus, and exiled to the distant city of Tomi, on the Black Sea. This was a serious exile for any Roman, let alone for an urban sophisticate accustomed to the cultural interactions of the metropolis. The world at large has never known the true cause of this exile, which Ovid attributes to *carmen et error*, a *song and an error*, terms which have resisted any clear interpretation though Ovid's contemporaries, and later scholars, have generated theories galore about what these words mean. One leading explanation is that Ovid had inside information about scandalous behaviors in Augustus' court. Whatever the case, we are sure that Augustus was outraged by some 'open immorality' Ovid had foregrounded in his long poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (2 C.E.), which promoted exactly the adultery that the new Emperor, Augustus, was making an intense effort to criminalize.

**The fury of Augustus.** The panoply of poems Ovid created, especially toward the end of a fertile life, included a wide variety of tones, within a single minded attention to issues of love. The early *Amores* (16/15 B.C.E.) include some of the world's wittiest couplets on the war (and truce) between the sexes; funny, bitter, urbane to the max. The *Heroides* (written between 29 and 13 B.C.E.) translate that witticism into insight; into the psychology (mostly female) encapsulated in imaginary 'love letters' written to one another by notable Greco-Roman literary figures. The *Ars Amatoria* (2 C.E.) is equally witty—a handbook first for guys, then for gals, on the most effective ways of seducing a married woman or man, depending; and with tons of collateral tips on, for example, detours like the lady's maid you use to get at the married lady, but who turns out to want a seduction of her own en route. (This kind of game playing was particularly odious to the Emperor Augustus.) Ovid's masterwork, the *Metamorphoses* (8 C.E.) is a compendium of 15 books and 250 myths, tracking the history of the world from its creation to the deification of Julius Caesar. In his last poems, written from Black Sea exile, Ovid writes *The Tristia* (9 C.E.-12 C.E.), elegant but deeply sad poems of banishment, in which he laments everything lost—his beloved Rome, his beloved third wife; the living urbanity for which isolation was ultimately the price he had to pay.

**Story.** The 'story' of the *Heroides* is intimately wrapped up with the *structure* of the collection itself. The work is all poetry, Ovid's elegiac couplets fashioned in the form of imaginary letters written by or to one another by eminent lovers drawn from Greek and Roman literature. In all there are twenty one poems, of which fifteen are 'single' poems, one lover to another without response, while three sets of 'double poems' follow them, each including an initial letter with the response to it—In every case the entire package imaginary, and drawn from the imagination of ancient Greco-Roman literature. The tales repeated, parodied, or simply reinterpreted in the *Heroides*, *The Tales of Heroic Ladies*, form a whole which is as coherent as the foregoing structure might suggest: by and large at work inside guiding themes:--resentment, insecurity, un-ease, and vanity—and a platform on which eminent women can vent over the hard turns of their life and loves.

The tales told by the *heroides*, in the letters Ovid writes from them, with one exception concern fictional characters—drawn from a wide variety of early Greco-Roman texts. (Among the Greek authors, whose characters have been put to use in Ovid's gallery of epistolography, are: Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Sappho, Callimachus, Apollonius, and a couple of texts whose origins are uncertain; among the Roman source texts is Virgil.) We have to conclude that Ovid had masterful inwardly control of a wide variety of Greek texts. The tales not only cohere through the structural strategy in which they are enclosed, but in the interweaving of the events their tellers set out to write' about.

Given this rather involved account, of the structure in which Ovid encloses his presentation, and anticipating the theme analysis ahead, in which we will step inside the minds of the *héroides*, it remains true that a subtle sophisticate, like Ovid, could have constructed a genuine story out of all the materials anthologized here, a story of the world in which these tales occur, and of the things that occur there. This story could have assumed epic proportions and have featured the disastrous consequences of war—as Penelope or Briseis is encountering them; the problems imposed on the aging woman (Sappho or Phaedra) or the mental dislocations (Medea) inseparable from the transient life of the immigrant. On the other hand, the experienced themes of many of the directive figures could have been given their heads, into the stories they are. That's where themes could be reinserted into were the tales of which they were originally constitutive.

## Themes

**Resentment.** Though Ovid excels at characterizing the unique, finding the rub in which each heroine finds her life particularly painful and astray, it can be guaranteed that each of the letters is basically a complaint, grounded in a particular literary woman's resentment of her life and the way it has played out. Broad resentment is omnipresent here.

Penelope tells us of her restless mind, which will seize on every comment about Troy for hints about the fate of her husband, while at the same time she groans with the knowledge that Ulysses is simply tarrying for other women, before completing his return to Ithaca. Her insecurity and fear build her anxious mind. Briseis, the concubine prize awarded to Achilles, resents her own helplessness as an historical pawn trapped between competing macho force-players; thus she dances along the same tightwires of anxiety that beckon to Penelope. Phaedra resents—curses, rather—the life which has obliged her to lust after her own stepson, in her own house. A scion of the dark mysteries of Crete with its Minos bull, Phaedra is a nervous wreck of threats, paranoid on every side, in the upscale humanism of Theseus' Athens. Dido finds herself miserable, courting a man like Aeneas, who can think only of leaving her in Carthage, so that he can get on with his mission of empire building; She dwells on her impending loss, feeling, at the same her inability to do anything about it. Like all these obsessed women, whose husbands seem indifferent to the ladies' problems. Dido and Phaedra invite deep self-portraits as victims of history.

Medea deeply resents her rejection by Jason, though she brings only arguments and black bile into the new culture of Thebes; Her immigrant status is one of pure hatred and resentment. Unlike Phaedra, Medea is no way susceptible to a strong artist like Sappho, The only historical figure among the women who write these letters, Sappho, is wretched because she has been abandoned by the handsome young man, half her age, who has forgotten about her.

**Insecurity.** The resentments listed above, are all interwoven with the fear and anxiety of an insecure relationship to the men they adore. For Penelope the source of insecurity is not knowing where Odysseus is and what he is doing. Briseis feels the same kind of insecurity, as she wonders who will possess her next. Phaedra, having committed herself to a love for Hippolytus, feels all the anxiety of wondering whether her secret love will come out.

**Un-ease.** Ovid is a master descriptor of half distinct, half-shadowy emotional states. Un-ease, a sense of shadowy condition, is one of them. Briseis is one of Ovid's most subtle and apprehensive characters. She loves Achilles, to whom she has initially been handed over by Agamemnon, at the outset of the *Iliad*. She is subsequently taken back from Achilles to Agamemnon, since she is a figure in the vanity contest between the two leaders. This is painful shadow-territory for Briseis. She has been with Achilles enough to have fallen in love with him, too long to have become a consecrated and stable item of exchange, but long enough to have realized how important that kind of stability is.

**Vanity.** The 'double letter' exchanged between Paris and Helen is riddled with that sense of self-importance which undergirds many of the life-resenting attitudes in the *Heroides*. Paris and Helen are both so charged with the sense of their supreme beauty that a mating or compromise between the two is barely imaginable. These two 'beautiful people' self-praise, so fervently in their letters, that they see nothing of the identity of the other. Broadly speaking, this kind of inability to see beyond oneself into another person pervades the unhappy protestations which most of these letters are.

## Characters

The characters Ovid impersonates himself with are innovative moves in ancient imagination. For all their stalwart grandeur or shy awedness, the characters who populate, say, Greek tragedy or Greek philosophy (including the figures—Protagoras, Meno, Phaedrus, Polus, Hippias—who simply prop up the argument in Plato--) these multiple character and character types, through whom Hellenic expression was prone to develop itself, are rarely nuanced in emotion and response, say to the extent we welcome such response in the lesser figures of early western fiction. The little guys of the western narrative—in Chaucer, Dante, or Rabelais—are of a nuanced and liquid fluidity we hardly expect from their counterparts in the ancient (or archaic) literatures. It is in this context that we begin to see the historical turn adopted by a sensibility like Ovid's—for that matter any of the personalistic and intimate Augustan poets (Horace, Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid) who were manifesting the new wealth of artistic richness visible on the street in the pullulating spiritual climate of the early first century, a period in which new layers of personal potentiality were being unfolded.