

Ovid (43 B.C.- 18 A.D.)

Distinctions within genres. We have made many distinctions within the lyric genre of Roman literature. We have found that Catullus, Horace, Propertius all 'deal with' love, but that only says so much. There are great differences among those 'dealings.' Catullus is robust and sensual, and at his most enamored ready to kiss Lesbia for an eternity. Propertius is as passionate as Catullus, but far more self-conscious about the kinds of language he is using to create himself a lover in poetry. (He is more philosophical than Catullus.) Horace is more multi-themed than Catullus or Propertius—more discursive about morals, life styles, the political world, the social world—and, especially in the material we have discussed, less furiously passionate and love conscious than the other two. (Horace is also the author of sensuous homoerotic poetry which has proven unpalatably direct to Western tastes, and which far exceeds the boldness of the other two lyricists.) It is finally worth noting, once again, the difference between the love poetries of these three men and the Romantic lyric, by which we mean the Wordsworthian tradition in post 1800 poetry, which privileges the whole hearted and innocent love of man and maid, against a background (frequently sketched, as in the poetry of Browning) against the sense of a cruel and fated world, in which the ultimate outcome of human emotions is dubious.

The works of Ovid. When we come to Ovid, a born poet, one 'born speaking in hexameters,' as he says of himself, we reach, if possible, a new level of sophistication. (When it comes to love poetry the Romans lead the pack in finesse and inventiveness.) Ovid wrote many literary works, all in highly disciplined, Greek inspired, meters, and many of those works concerned love. We will address these promptly. But who was this Ovid?

Ovid's life. Publius Ovidius Naso was born in Sulmo to an important equestrian family—equestrian, as you recall, meaning just below the highest patrician rank. He was sent to Rome for his education—as were all his 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—and here too you see a familiar pattern—Ovid went to Athens to study, and while studying there traveled to Asia Minor and Sicily. (Are you noticing, as we move through Roman history, that privileged Roman youth traveled widely, in the eastern Mediterranean?) From 29 B.C.-25 B.C. Ovid returned to Rome to devote himself to poetry. It was at this period that he too found his patron. This time it was not 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, but who moved toward Augustus, as the tide of history swept in that direction, and whose daughter, Julia, became a keystone of the Augustan circle. 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 pave 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. He was in the midst of 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 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 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 *carmem 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 major trend of explanation is that Ovid had inside information about scandalous behaviors in Augustus' court. Whatever the case there, precisely, we are sure that Augustus was outraged by the 'open immorality' Ovid had foregrounded in his long poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (21A.D.), 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, in a fertile life, included a wide variety of tones. The early *Amores* (16/15 B.C.) include some of the world's wittiest couplets on the war (and truce) between the sexes; funny, bitter, urbane to the max. The *Ars Amatoria* (2 A.D.) 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.) In his last poems, written from Black Sea exile, Ovid writes *The Tristia* (9 A.D.-12 A.D.), elegant but deeply sad poems from exile, in which he laments everything lost—his beloved Rome, his beloved third wife.

Readings

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, Book One, trans. Hollis (Oxford, 1992).

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Raeburn (New York, 2004.)

Ovid's Poetry of Exile (translated into verse by David Slavitt) (Baltimore, 1990).

Liveley, Genevieve, *Ovid: Love Songs* (Bristol, 2005.)