

P. OVIDIUS NASO (43 B.C. - A.D. 17)



Ovid was born of an old equestrian family on March 20, 43 B.C. His father intended him for a political career, but after holding a few minor magistracies Ovid abandoned public life for poetry. He was a protégé of M. Valerius Mesalla Corvinus (cos. 31 B.C.), and stood somewhat apart from the literary circle that centered on Augustus' political advisor Maecenas.

His poetry brought him to the notice of Rome's powerful elite and by 8 B.C. he had become a member of the inner circle of literary talent that flourished under Augustus. But in that year he was suddenly banished by Augustus to Tomis on the Black Sea, for reasons obscure to us but reported to be connected to some moral crime. Despite repeated pleas and appeals to Rome, Ovid spent the remainder of his life in this outpost of civilization, a semi-hellenized city on the fringe of the Roman Empire. There he continued his literary output until his death in A.D. 17.

Ovid rested his hopes of immortality on the *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem in 15 books and the only one of his works written in hexameter. The work is a collection of stories from classical and Near Eastern mythology, each dealing in some way with a transformation. The stories are told in roughly chronological order, beginning with Chaos and progressing to the height of Augustan Order, the apotheosis of Julius Caesar. Although drawing on many sources (most now lost to us), the *Metamorphoses* is a highly original work, freely adapting apparently unsuitable material to an Augustan theme. Ovid had the insight to realize that Vergil could not be rivalled on his own terms, and had the genius to create a "modern epic" based on mythology and fable and not historical material.

Ovid was a prolific writer and much of his work survives. The *Amores* are three books of love poems, the *Heroides* is a collection of letters from legendary women to absent husbands or lovers. The *Ars Amatoria* is a didactic poem in three books on the arts of seduction and intrigue. The *Fasti* deals with the Roman calendar and contains much historical and religious detail on Roman life. The *Tristia* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* are elaborate defenses of Ovid's works and appeals for a return from exile. The *Ibis* is an extended curse on an unnamed enemy, possibly the author of Ovid's banishment.

Ovid was immediately popular and has remained so to this day. Many spurious works were attributed to him in antiquity and the Middle Ages.