

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso)

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Publius Ovidius Naso (43 BCE–18 CE) was the most accomplished elegist that Rome produced, and is notable for the sheer volume and unprecedented variety of his works. Ovid used elegy as a platform to experiment with a wide variety of poetic genres, yet did not identify his persona exclusively with any one of them. Originally from Sulmona in the Abruzzo region of Italy, Ovid was sent to Rome for an education in rhetoric. He abandoned a political career to write poetry and received support from Messalla Corvinus (*Tristia* 4.10). Ovid was the most prominent poet at Rome when AUGUSTUS suddenly exiled him to TOMIS (modern Costanza, Romania) in 8 CE. Ovid reports that this was due to *carmen et error* (*Tristia* 2.107). Most likely, the *carmen* refers to his *Ars Amatoria*, and his *error* could relate to a scandal in the imperial family.

Although the chronology of Ovid's works is problematic, some of the poems in his earliest work, the *Amores*, could have been written as early as 20 BCE. Ovid's literary self-consciousness is already evident in his youthful experimentation with the conventions of elegy. In the *Amores*, poetry is a *lusus* and Ovid displays his own mastery of elegiac conventions and its discursive relationship to other genres, such as epic. An abiding interest in the relationship between elegy and didactic poetry throughout Ovid's career begins with the *Ars Amatoria*, and continues with the *Remedia Amoris* and the *Fasti*. In the *Ars*, Ovid instructs both male and female lovers on the art of seduction, and Augustan Rome becomes the backdrop for this pursuit. The *Remedia Amoris* turns the tables on the elegist's devotion to a mistress and instructs the reader on how to free himself from the *servitium amoris*. Written to imitate the structure of the Roman calendar, Ovid's *Fasti* is a remarkable synthesis

of Roman antiquarian traditions and Callimachean aetiologies that further reimagines the boundaries of elegy (Barchiesi 1997). Ovid uses a sophisticated narrative voice in these works, one that not only narrates but also serves as literary critic, reader, and commentator on Greek and Roman poetry.

Along with love, mythology is an enduring interest in Ovid's oeuvre. The *Heroides* combines elegy with epistolography as a series of Greek heroines write to their absent lovers. The *Metamorphoses* is a distinctly elegiac take on the genre of epic (Hinds 1987). In this *carmen perpetuum*, Ovid continues to experiment with the dynamics of narrative, as many of the mythological characters tell their own and others' stories (Wheeler 1999). The epic also addresses the precarious relationship between artists and power. They frequently suffer transformation at the hands of the gods and also become the victims of their own creations.

In his exilic writings, Ovid returns to the format of the poetic epistle. In the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, Ovid details his voyage to the Black Sea and his life among the GETAE, and urges his friends and family to lobby Augustus and other members of the imperial family to end his relegation or at least move him closer to Rome. Yet Ovid models his poetic persona on mythological exiles and represents his circumstances as a literary construction (Williams 1994).

SEE ALSO: Callimachus; Exile.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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