

Work

Publius Ovidius Naso was born in 43 BCE in the Italian town of Sulmo (modern Sulmona) but spent most of his adult life in Rome. In 8 CE, he was banished by the emperor Augustus to Tomis (modern Constantza), a town on the shores of the Black Sea in what is today Romania, where he died in 17 or 18 CE. What little else is known about Ovid's life will be the subject of the next chapter, but for the moment, these bare dates may serve as the chronological framework for an examination of the poet's work.

Ovid's poems are notoriously difficult to date, and no attempt will be made here to solve any of the longstanding chronological problems. Roughly speaking, the poet's work can be divided into three phases, treated in turn below. In the first twenty-five years or so of his active career (mid-20s BCE to c. 2 CE), Ovid published a number of poetry collections and shorter works in the elegiac meter, all of which treat, in one way or another, the topic of love. In the following six years up to his exile (2–8 CE), he was working on his two longest poems, the epic *Metamorphoses* and the elegiac *Fasti*. Finally, Ovid produced a number of works in exile, including the collections *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, as well as the curse poem *Ibis*, all in elegiacs. These phases are not clearly distinct: it is quite possible that Ovid began work on the *Metamorphoses* and/or *Fasti* before 2 CE, and it is obvious that he revised at least the latter while in exile. Finally, there are a number of Ovidian works that are lost – most notably the tragedy *Medea* – as well as poems attributed to Ovid that scholars today believe to be inauthentic. These are discussed at the very end of the chapter.

Love Poems

Amores (“Loves”)

In its transmitted form, the *Amores* is a collection in three books of forty-nine elegiac poems in the style of Tibullus and Propertius, in which the male first-person speaker treats his erotic feelings and relationship with a woman whom he calls Corinna. The work is prefaced by a short epigram that informs the reader that there were originally five books but that the author reissued the work in abridged form, making it (thus the poem humorously claims) a less painful read. The fact that the *Amores* underwent these two editions significantly complicates any attempt to establish a chronology for the work’s publication(s), especially since it is unclear whether the five books of the first edition came out together or consecutively and whether or not new poems were added to the second edition.

In *Tr.* 4.10.57–60, Ovid says that his first public poetry reading took place “when [his] beard had been cut once or twice” (58) and that it featured poems about Corinna. This would put the earliest parts of the *Amores* some time in the 20s BCE. Very few of the poems in the surviving three-book edition contain references to datable events: 3.9 mentions the death of the poet Tibullus (19 BCE) and 1.14.45–50 alludes to a Roman victory over the Germanic tribe of the Sygambri (possibly 16 BCE, though hostilities continued and the tribe was finally defeated only in 8 BCE). Intriguing but problematic is poem 2.18, where Ovid refers to a number of his other works as completed or in progress: these include the *Medea* (13–14), the *Heroides* (21–6), and perhaps the *Ars amatoria* (19–20). The last reference is doubtful since some scholars have taken Ovid’s mention of the “arts of tender love” (*artes teneri ... Amoris*, 19) as an allusion not to the *Ars* but to the *Amores* itself. However, if Ovid does mean the *Ars*, datable to c. 1 BCE–2 CE, then poem 2.18 is a very late addition to the *Amores*, no doubt written for the second edition, which must then be placed around the turn of the millennium. It is thus possible that the poet worked on the *Amores*, on and off, for about twenty-five years.

The *Amores* is the last manifestation of the genre of Roman love elegy, which will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 3. In keeping with the conventions of the genre, the first-person speaker of the *Amores* is both a lover and a poet of love, that is, an elegist. In addition to appearing in a number of typical elegiac situations (at the dinner party, on his lover’s doorstep, jealous at a rival, enraged at the perfidy of his mistress, etc.), the poet-lover also frequently reflects on his activities as a poet. By

drawing attention to the artificiality of the elegiac scenario (in which a man, overwhelmed by love, pines for an ultimately unattainable, idealized woman) and stressing the more physical aspects of an erotic relationship (including such unromantic incidents as impotence, 3.7, and abortion, 2.13 and 14), Ovid pokes fun at elegy while widening its scope, a tendency that continues in his other amatory works.

Heroides (“Heroines”)

The *Heroides* or *Epistulae heroidum* (“Letters of Heroines”) are fictional letters in elegiacs, purportedly written by mythological women (and a few men) to their love interests. There are twenty-one such poems that have come down to us under Ovid’s name. The first fifteen (“single *Heroides*”) are letters by heroines to the men they love, from whom they have been separated (not infrequently having been abandoned) and with whom they wish to be reunited. These letter-writers include such famous literary characters as Penelope, Phaedra, Dido, Ariadne, and Medea, as well as, exceptionally, a historical woman, the poet Sappho, nominal author of *Heroides* 15. The remaining six letters (“double *Heroides*”) constitute three pairs, in each of which a man first writes to his female beloved and then receives an answer. The couples involved are Paris and Helen, Leander and Hero, and Acontius and Cydippe.

As noted above, Ovid mentions a few of the single *Heroides* in *Am.* 2.18.21–6, which implies that they were written simultaneously with (parts of) the *Amores*, that is, some time in the last quarter of the 1st century BCE. In the same text (27–34), Ovid tells us that a friend of his by the name of Sabinus composed poems in which he had the male addressees write back to the heroines; thus, for example, Penelope finally received an answer from the wayward Odysseus. It is possible that Sabinus’ witty sequel (which does not survive) gave Ovid the idea for the correspondences found in the double *Heroides*. Since Ovid himself never mentions the paired letters (which, treating mythological topics, contain no references to contemporary events), it is impossible to date them, beyond the fact that they must have been written after *Am.* 2.18. On stylistic grounds, scholars often place the double *Heroides* quite late in Ovid’s career, and they were perhaps written only during the poet’s exile.

A lively debate surrounds the authenticity of some of the *Heroides*. Most often called into question is the letter of Sappho, which is now conventionally referred to as no. 15 of the collection but which has a different manuscript tradition from the remaining twenty letters and has been known only since the 15th century. The double letters, too, have

been suspected as spurious, as have others, particularly those of the single letters not mentioned explicitly in *Am.* 2.18 (to complicate matters, though, that poem *does* refer to a letter by Sappho). Most of the arguments are based on suspicious stylistic and metrical features in the letters in question. The issue will continue to be debated, but it seems to me more likely than not that all twenty-one letters are in fact Ovidian, and I treat them as such in what follows.

Medicamina faciei femineae (“Cosmetics for the Female Face”)

With the *Medicamina* Ovid begins his foray into didactic poetry, a genre typically written in hexameters and dedicated, at least ostensibly, to teaching either a practical skill (such as agriculture in Vergil’s *Georgics*) or a theoretical field of knowledge (such as Epicurean physics in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*). Ovid, by contrast, dispenses his instructions in elegiacs and treats a suitably elegiac topic: a woman’s cosmetics. The poem exists today only in fragmentary form, breaking off after line 100. Half of what we have is taken up by a proem in which Ovid, addressing his female audience, celebrates the concept of *cultus* (“cultivation, sophistication”) that underlies not only female adornment, but culture in general. The rest of the text consists of very technical “recipes” for various skin treatments and facial creams. Since the *Medicamina* is mentioned in *Ars* 3 (205–8), it must have been written before that book and most likely before the entire *Ars*.

Ars amatoria (“Art of Love”)

If in the *Medicamina*, Ovid was trying out his original combination of a didactic format with elegiac meter and subject matter, he perfected this new hybrid genre in the *Ars*. Roman love elegy, including Ovid’s *Amores*, merely *describes* the poet-lover’s often painful amatory experiences. By contrast, the new “Art of Love” ambitiously undertakes to *teach* elegiac love – and teach it in such a way that it is no longer painful. In Books 1 and 2, Ovid addresses himself to the young men of Rome, demonstrating that a satisfactory relationship can be achieved in three easy steps: first the man must find a woman to love; then he must seduce her; and finally he must take steps for their love to last for an extended period of time. The teacher’s instructions are hands-on: he enumerates auspicious pick-up places throughout the city of Rome, builds up his students’ confidence before they approach their girls, and generally provides advice on everything from the writing of love letters and the giving of gifts to successful

behavior in the bedroom. At the end of Book 2, the young men have secured their female lovers and celebrate their teacher Ovid as the master of his craft.

At this point, Ovid declares that the “tender girls” (2.745), too, are asking for his advice and, ostensibly out of a sense of fairness, launches into his third book, which contains instructions for the women. It has traditionally been assumed that after the first two books were published and met with success, Ovid conceived of Book 3 as a funny sequel that was to treat the material of the male-centered preceding books from a female perspective. It is, however, also possible that the poet planned the three books as a unit from the start and that the claim that Book 3 is an afterthought, undertaken only at the urging of the women themselves, is but a humorous fiction. Book 3 itself harks back to the *Medicamina* in recommending *cultus* to the women and offers plentiful advice on such topics as clothing and hairstyles. While Ovid clearly expects his female students to take a less active role than the males in the pursuit of their love interests, he is still training them to be serious players who know how to manipulate men for their own purposes.

The first book of the *Ars* contains references to two contemporary events that allow us to date the work unusually closely. In 171–6, Ovid mentions as a recent occurrence a mock naval battle that Augustus staged in 2 BCE, and in 177–228, he discusses the imminent Parthian campaign of the emperor’s grandson Gaius Caesar, who departed for the east in 1 BCE. At least the first two books were thus presumably published in late 2 or early 1 BCE. If Book 3 was part of the original plan, it belongs to the same time; if not, it probably appeared shortly thereafter.

Remedia amoris (“Remedies for Love”)

As we have seen, already in *Ars* 3, Ovid delights in humorously reversing some of the teaching of his two preceding books. In the *Remedia*, Ovid’s last work of amatory didactic, the poet executes a further about-face. Having taught the art of love, Ovid now offers advice on how to free oneself from any unwanted emotions and attractions. As is apparent from the title, the poet here presents himself as a doctor confident of healing his patients of the “disease” of love (a traditional metaphor much used in Roman love elegy). While still humorous in tone, the book’s advice (such as not to become entangled in an unhealthy relationship in the first place, to distract oneself through activity, and to effect a clean but non-hostile breakup) is generally more sober and even finds parallels in the ethical teachings of contemporary philosophy.

In the context of advising the lovesick student to join the army to take his mind off his beloved, Ovid again mentions Gaius Caesar, who at this point has arrived in Parthia and is presented as poised for battle (155–6). However, rather than fighting the Parthians, the actual Gaius reached a diplomatic settlement with them in 2 CE. Since Ovid was apparently not yet aware of this when he wrote his lines, we may conjecture that he completed the *Remedia* and thus his amatory oeuvre by early 2 CE.

Long Poems

Metamorphoses (“Transformations”)

After Ovid’s comparatively short elegiac works, the *Metamorphoses*, a hexametric epic in fifteen books, presents a striking departure. As the poet announces in the proem, the work’s topic is “shapes changed into new bodies” (1.1–2), that is, myths of transformation. Metamorphosis had been a favorite subject of Greek literature, and such learned works as the *Heteroionumena* (“Changes”) of Nicander (2nd C. BCE) may have served as the Roman poet’s sources. However, Ovid’s project is considerably more ambitious than any previous catalogue of transformations. At the end of the proem, he asks the gods to direct his song “from the first beginning of the world to my own times” (1.3–4), highlighting the universal scope of a poem that purports to cover metamorphoses that took place from the creation of the cosmos (described at the beginning of Book 1) all the way to the reigns of Julius Caesar and Augustus (mentioned at the end of Book 15).

Most of Ovid’s material is what we would call mythological (though note that for the ancients, the distinction between myth and history was not always clearly drawn, and a story like that of Aeneas might well be considered either), and in the course of the work, the poet manages to cover most major Greco-Roman myths (such as the Trojan War and the exploits of Hercules) and a multitude of less prominent ones. The *Metamorphoses* is thus an excellent source for ancient myth and was used as a veritable mythological handbook by writers and artists throughout Western cultural history (see further chapter 8 on the reception of Ovid in Renaissance and Baroque art). The poem is divided into three blocks of five books each, a structure that corresponds to the chronological progression of the work’s subject matter. Books 1–5 treat exploits of the gods, Books 6–10 recount the adventures of heroes, and Books 11–15 tell tales about mere men.

In writing the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid faced the challenge of treating a large number of individual stories (there are about 250) while making them all part of an overarching narrative. He achieved this through a number of methods, including varying the length and focus of individual tales (some stories are alluded to in a few words, others told for hundreds of lines), enclosing stories within stories through the use of internal narrators (about a third of the text consists in embedded narrative), and devising ingenious transitions from story to story. While it is thus possible to mine the *Metamorphoses* for particular myths or read individual episodes out of context, the full extent of Ovid's virtuosity becomes apparent only to those who make their way through the poem from beginning to end.

Not all stories in the *Metamorphoses* contain actual metamorphoses, and a few of the transformations recounted seem to be only tenuously related to the tales in which they appear. Nevertheless, metamorphosis is the central theme of the poem, and Ovid delights in describing in detail many of the uncanny transformations (mostly of human beings into animals or plants) that occur in the course of his narrative. The significance of metamorphosis is manifold. First, transformation myths serve as an explanation for why the world is the way it is today (along the lines of "how the leopard got his spots"), attesting to the great interest the Greeks and Romans took in aetiology (from Greek *aition*, "(story of) origin"). Second, metamorphoses often bring out an inherent trait in the character transformed, such as when the "wolfish" Lycaon is actually changed into a wolf in Book 1. In a way, metamorphosis is thus but metaphor turned real, which makes the world of the *Metamorphoses* a realm where language becomes alive. Finally, the never-ending stream of transformations in the poem conveys the idea of an unstable world that is in continuous flux. This view finds its expression in the speech of the philosopher Pythagoras, which takes up a large part of Book 15 (75–478). Though in many ways a ridiculous character, Pythagoras surely captures some of the spirit of the poem in which he appears when he remarks that, as a universal rule, "nothing retains its shape" (252).

Since myth was the primary subject of Greek and Latin literature, a work that recounts a multitude of mythological stories must necessarily engage with a multitude of literary predecessors. As a result, the *Metamorphoses* is a highly intertextual poem that interacts in original ways with many sources in many genres, including Homer, Greek tragedy, and Hellenistic epyllion (short epic). Of particular interest is Ovid's relationship to Vergil. Already by Ovid's time, the *Aeneid* was considered *the*

classic Roman epic, and the younger poet (like many Latin epic writers after him) felt the need to position his own work creatively in relation to the master. Not only is the *Metamorphoses* as a whole a decidedly un-Vergilian epic (some scholars have even called it anti-Vergilian), but Ovid also presents a most idiosyncratic rewriting of the *Aeneid* in his own treatment of the story of Aeneas in 13.623–14.608.

In *Tr.* 1.7, Ovid claims that when he was banished, the *Metamorphoses* was as yet unfinished and that he therefore burned the poem before his departure. The text survived, however; as the poet remarks (no doubt tongue in cheek), “I guess it existed in numerous copies” (*Tr.* 1.7.24). Both the burning of the poem (if it ever happened) and the reference to its supposedly unfinished state appear to be attempts on the part of Ovid to further align himself with Vergil, who famously (if unsuccessfully) asked for the *Aeneid* to be destroyed after his death on account of its lack of a final hand. In the case of the *Metamorphoses*, it is possible that Ovid further revised the work in exile; the final product certainly looks finished to us.

Fasti (“The Roman Calendar”)

If, despite Ovid’s claims, we are unable to spot imperfections in the *Metamorphoses*, the case is different with the *Fasti*. In *Tr.* 2.549–50, the poet maintains to have written twelve books of this work. However, only six have come down to us, with no evidence that the poem’s would-be second half ever existed. While it is possible that the books were lost in the process of textual transmission, it is more likely that Ovid deliberately exaggerated (his words in *Tristia* 2 are addressed to Augustus, to whom he originally dedicated the poem, 551–2) and either never got around to finishing the work or, as some scholars have suggested, simply decided not to pursue it further.

Also unlike in the case of the *Metamorphoses*, there are clear indications that Ovid revised the *Fasti* in exile. In 4.81–4, he explicitly refers to his place of banishment, lamenting how far away it is from his hometown of Sulmo. Furthermore, Book 1 in particular shows obvious signs of having been reworked after the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Ovid apparently decided that it would be more useful if the work were addressed to a living member of the imperial family and – in addition to making a few other changes to reflect the changed political situation – wrote a new proem, in which he dedicated the *Fasti* to the prince Germanicus. Many scholars believe that part of what is now the introduction to Book 2 once belonged to the original first proem, written when the *Fasti* was still

intended for Augustus. Ovid apparently never updated the entire work; thus, even leaving aside the lack of the last six books, the poem may be considered unfinished.

The Latin term *fasti* (from (*dies*) *fastus*, “day on which business may be transacted”) refers to a list of annually recurring holidays and other anniversaries, that is, more or less what we would call a (religious) calendar. The Romans had inscriptional *fasti* that listed the days of each month, indicating the significance that attached to them; these, as well as written commentaries that further explained the meaning and rituals of each date, were no doubt important sources for Ovid’s poem. Especially after the reform of Julius Caesar in 46 BCE, the calendar became a “hot topic” at Rome. Antiquarians aimed at uncovering the origins of the ancient rites and customs enshrined in the *fasti*, while Augustus ingeniously availed himself of the calendar as a means of propaganda, inserting among the old festivals new holidays that celebrated his own achievements and those of family members. In its linking of hallowed antiquity and contemporary ideology, the calendar was a perfect expression of Roman identity in the Augustan age and as such a promising, if challenging, topic for a poem.

Ovid’s *Fasti* dedicates one book to each month of the calendar, which means that we have his treatment of January through June. After a proem, each book discusses individual (though not all) days of the month in order, following a principle of variation: some dates receive but short notice in a verse or two, while others are treated at considerable length. The content, too, is varied: in addition to longstanding religious festivals and new Augustan holidays, Ovid mentions the risings and settings of constellations (a time-honored method of tracking the changing seasons) and, in the context of explicating the meaning of each day, variously recounts myths, reconstructs historical events, provides etymologies, gives weather forecasts, and discusses the history and technicalities of the Roman calendar itself.

Despite the genuinely Roman subject matter, the main literary influence on the *Fasti* is the *Aetia* (“Origins”) of the Hellenistic poet Callimachus (3rd C. BCE). In this poem, Callimachus – whose work and poetic principles had an enormous influence on Latin literature more generally – explains the origins of a number of obscure Greek religious customs; similarly, Ovid in the *Fasti* discusses the aetiology of Roman religious practices, thus taking on the role of a Roman Callimachus. In doing so, he is following the lead of Propertius, who in his fourth book of elegies had already included a number of aetiological poems on Roman themes, in avowed imitation of Callimachus. Like the *Aetia*, and like

Propertius' Callimachean experiment, the *Fasti* is written in elegiacs, which affords Ovid the opportunity for self-referential reflection on the questionable appropriateness of this meter for some of the lofty patriotic topics that he treats.

In Callimachus' *Aetia*, we observe the poet as he gathers information about his various objects of interest, engaging in conversations first with the Muses (Books 1 and 2) and then with a number of individual interlocutors (Books 3 and 4). Ovid adopts and further develops this format, presenting himself throughout the *Fasti* as a researcher into the Roman calendar, one who interviews a wide variety of informants, from gods and the Muses to an old Roman woman and a man sitting next to the poet in the theater. The *Fasti* is thus not just a poem about the Roman calendar, but very much a poem about the process of composing a poem about the Roman calendar. As the poet learns in the course of his research, the truth about the origins, names, and meanings of the manifold religious and other traditions recorded in the calendar is far from easy to uncover since the researcher has to contend with multiple explanations and possibly biased informants. The resultant uncertainty is most clearly, and amusingly, expressed in the proems to Books 5 and 6, where first the Muses cannot agree on the etymology of the month of May and then three goddesses nearly come to blows when quarreling over the meaning of June.

Exile Poems

Tristia ("Sad Poems") and *Epistulae ex Ponto* ("Letters from the Black Sea")

Although the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* are separate works composed at different stages during Ovid's exile, they are similar enough in tone and subject matter to be usefully treated together. Ovid wrote the five books of *Tristia* over the first years of his exile (8–12 CE) and published *Epistulae ex Ponto* 1–3 jointly in 12 or 13 CE; the fourth and final book of the latter work (which contains references to the death of Augustus in 14 CE) may have been made public only after the poet's death. Both works are collections of individual elegies (there are fifty poems in the *Tristia*, forty-six in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*), nearly all of which are addressed to friends, family members, and other people in Rome. In the *Tristia*, Ovid does not name his addressees, purportedly to protect them from negative repercussions; this policy is abandoned in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, which are more explicitly styled as actual letters.

The theme of both works may be largely defined as Ovid's experiences in exile. In the course of the poems, the poet constructs a narrative of how and why he was banished, how he traveled to the Black Sea, and how he is now living in Tomis. The reason and circumstances of his exile are alluded to throughout the collection: Ovid famously – and cryptically – blames *carmen et error* (“a poem and a mistake,” *Tr.* 2.207) for his having incurred Augustus' displeasure. He identifies the *carmen* as the *Ars amatoria* but only hints at the nature of the *error* (which scholars have suspected to be the main cause of his banishment; see the discussion in the next chapter), ostensibly to spare the emperor's feelings. While Ovid's departure from Rome and journey to Tomis are the topic of *Tristia* 1, the second book of the *Tristia* consists of one single long poem addressed to Augustus, in which Ovid defends the *Ars*. The rest of his exilic work is dedicated to describing and reflecting on his situation as an exile.

Ovid presents Tomis as a place at the edges of the inhabited earth, in all aspects as far removed from Rome – the center of the poet's universe – as can be imagined. The climate is harsh, the area is constantly threatened by barbarian invasions, and the natives lack all culture and sophistication. Scholars have pointed out that this picture cannot be realistic: the modern city of Constantza is in fact a seaside resort, and ancient Tomis had been a colony of the Greek city Miletus and remained a Hellenized town. Ovid's depiction of his place of exile as supremely desolate and dangerous owes much to literary depictions of such semi-mythical, faraway peoples as the Scythians. His deliberate overdramatization of the situation is no doubt intended to serve not only poetic but also practical purposes and ultimately to induce Augustus to recall the poet to Rome or at least change the place of his exile.

Separated from Rome, Ovid nostalgically conjures up the city in his poetry, imagining its topography and such urban events as the military triumphs of members of the imperial family. His most important means of keeping up a connection with the world from which he has been expelled is his relationships to his friends and to his wife, connections that he reflects on, and actively maintains, by way of his poems. He reminds his addressees of their past friendship, praises them for their faithfulness or otherwise enjoins them to stay loyal, and implores them to intercede with the emperor on his behalf. Particularly emotional are his appeals to his wife, who stayed behind in Rome in order to protect Ovid's interests there. While the poet expresses his longing for her and celebrates her devotion, he also grows increasingly desperate as her efforts at having his banishment revoked meet with no success.

A major topic of the exile poetry is poetry itself. Ovid comes back again and again to his ambivalent relationship to the Muses: on the one hand, it was his poetry (specifically the *Ars amatoria*) that ruined him; on the other hand, he seems to be unable to stop composing verse, which at the very least offers comfort and distraction. However (he explains), just like his fortunes, his poetry, too, has changed. No longer interested in fame, he now writes for the practical purpose of bringing about his return to Rome. If his work seems different, this is because it reflects his new situation: since the author is sad, his verse is as well (witness the title *Tristia*), and since his life in Tomis is monotonous, his poems also keep repeating the same few themes. Even worse, because Ovid is removed from the culture of Rome, lacks a library and a sophisticated audience, and is so depressed that he is beyond caring, his poetry has deteriorated to the extent that the poet is no longer sure even of his Latin, living, as it were, in linguistic exile as well. This motif of decline and alienation reaches its climax in one of Ovid's latest poems from exile (*Pont.* 4.13), in which the poet, who has meanwhile learned the language of his fellow Tomitans, announces that he has composed his own poem in Getic (19–22).

Readers used to take seriously Ovid's claim of poetic deterioration, and the exile poems for a long time suffered from a correspondingly bad reputation. More recently, though, scholars have not only demonstrated that the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* show no signs that Ovid's talent was fading, but also begun to interpret the poet's claims to the contrary as part of a literary strategy. Over the course of the two collections, Ovid creates his own story of his exile, a powerful and highly stylized tale that – given the lack of other historical sources – has become for us the canonical version of this tragic turn in the author's life.

Ibis

Ovid's remaining work from exile is the curious *Ibis*, an elegiac poem of 642 lines in which the poet curses an unnamed former friend of his who has turned traitor, maligning Ovid at Rome and attempting to profit from his exile. The poem must have been written before 12 CE (lines 1–2 imply that the author is not yet fifty-five years old) and thus falls in the same period as the *Tristia*. The "victim" has not been satisfactorily identified, and it is perhaps more likely that Ovid did not have a specific individual in mind and rather constructed "Ibis" as a kind of model foe.

As the poet explicitly states (53–8), the work is modeled on a poem of Callimachus with the same title (the pseudonym Ibis refers to the bird

of the same name, considered disgusting for its supposed habit of using its beak to insert water into its anus in order to purge itself). Since this work is lost, it is unclear how closely Ovid followed his model. His poem is divided into two parts: in lines 1–248, the poet utters a general curse against Ibis, which is followed in 249–642 by a series of what Ovid calls *historiae caecae* (“obscure stories,” 55), that is, riddling references to gruesome myths, whose disasters and calamities Ovid wishes on Ibis. To choose one of the least obscure examples, the poet curses Ibis to be torn to pieces like Pentheus: “or, rent apart, may you be scattered in the woods by the hands of your family members, just as at Thebes the snake’s grandson was scattered” (531–2; note the learned allusion to the origins of the Thebans in the dragon’s teeth sown by Cadmus). The text is presented as a tour-de-force performance on the part of its first-person speaker, the poet, who keeps up the enraged denouncement of his victim for hundreds of lines, coming up with more and more fantastic punishments before closing with the warning that, unless Ibis mends his ways, the poem will have been nothing but a short prelude to more potent curses to come.

Lost and Spurious Poems

It is a sobering fact that the vast majority of literary works from ancient Greece and Rome will remain forever unknown to us, having been lost in the hazardous process of textual transmission from antiquity to the modern period. Ovid has fared much better than many other authors (for example, only about ten lines survive of the celebrated poems of the first Roman love elegist, Gallus), but even his oeuvre has not come down to us intact. Most regrettable is the loss of his tragedy *Medea*, which the poet alludes to in *Am.* 2.18 and which later authors such as Seneca the Elder, Tacitus, and Quintilian mention as well. Two short fragments of the play survive, both apparently taken from speeches of Medea herself.

Ovid is also credited with having produced a translation of the *Phaenomena* (“Visible Signs”) of the Hellenistic poet Aratus (3rd C. BCE), two short fragments of which are quoted in later sources. Aratus’ poem, a description of the constellations, was exceedingly popular in Rome and had been translated into Latin by Cicero; Ovid’s contemporary Germanicus, the dedicatee of the *Fasti*, produced a version as well. That Ovid would have participated in this Roman craze for Aratus is not surprising, and the risings and settings of constellations and star myths of the *Fasti* further attest to his interest in astronomical material.

If some of Ovid's works are thus lost, we are in possession of other poems that were attributed to the poet, either already in antiquity or in the medieval manuscripts, but that most modern scholars believe to be inauthentic. The most prominent of these are the *Halieutica* ("The Art of Fishing"), the *Nux* ("The Walnut Tree"), and the *Consolatio ad Liviām* ("Consolation of Livia"). The *Halieutica* is a fragment of 134 hexameters that mostly discusses the innate ability of various types of fish to protect themselves against predators and the tricks fishermen need to use if they want to catch them nonetheless. The *Nux* is an elegy in 182 lines in which a wayside walnut tree complains about the people who pelt it with stones in order to gather its nuts. Finally, in the *Consolatio ad Liviām*, the poem's speaker comforts the empress Livia over the death of her son Drusus (9 BCE). Reasons to consider these works spurious include metrical and linguistic anomalies, though the *Halieutica* in particular also has its defenders, who believe it to be Ovidian after all.

While the following discussion will not take account of the poems discussed in the previous paragraph, it is important to be aware that in dealing with texts that are 2,000 years old, there is no absolute certainty that what we are reading was actually written as such by the author in question. As mentioned above, some of the *Heroides* have been suspected of being inauthentic; the *Fasti* (if not the *Metamorphoses*) appears to be unfinished; and supposed revisions and second editions complicate matters. In addition, since these works survived, until the arrival of printing, by being copied and recopied by hand, numerous errors have crept in, many of which are easily spotted and corrected but some of which no doubt persist undetected. As the next chapter will show, we have to rely more or less entirely on Ovid's works in order to gain a sense of Ovid the man; while we have his words, his person remains elusive. However, it is worth bearing in mind that even the words that we have are always only an approximation (however good) of what Ovid himself must actually have written.