

Ovid

In 43 BC - the year in which Cicero was executed and both consuls fell in the bitter civil war which followed Caesar's death - Publius Ovidius Naso was born at Sulmo in Umbria, a town 90 miles east of Rome. His father was a well-to-do member of the equestrian order who wished Ovid to undertake the study of rhetoric, which would have led to a career either in politics or in the law. But Ovid's lack of political ambition and his almost miraculous gift for versifying put paid to his father's hopes. In an autobiographical poem Ovid tells us:

quod temptabam scribere, versus erat

whatever I attempted to write down, turned out to be verse.

- in other words he claimed to be a natural poet. His first work *Amores* soon established him as a leading poet in Rome and he devoted the rest of his life to his art. He married three times. His third wife was very loyal to him and stood by him when he lost the favour of the Emperor Augustus.

Very little of Ovid's love poetry had been written in the spirit of the moral reforms which the Emperor Augustus wished to introduce. Augustus was particularly keen to protect or restore the stability of Roman family life, whose strength and piety, in the Emperor's opinion, had been a major factor in the growth of Roman power and which he felt had been sadly undermined during the long periods of unrest and civil war. Other leading poets of the day, such as Virgil and Horace, had responded positively to the wishes of Augustus. Ovid, however, had not only failed to highlight the virtues of the old Roman way of life, but had given publicity in his love poems to a way of life which was the opposite of the Emperor's ideal. In AD 8, just as Ovid was finishing the sixth book of the *Fasti*, the terrible blow fell - Augustus issued a decree banishing Ovid to a small frontier town on the Black Sea. The town was Tomi, the modern Constanza, in Romania.

Ovid gives two reasons for his exile: a poem which he wrote (probably *Ars Amatoria*, which it was claimed had bad social and moral effects); and what he calls his error, which he fails to explain, but was possibly some indiscretion involving Julia, granddaughter of Augustus, who was exiled about the same time. The decree was final and Ovid died in Tomi in AD 18.

So Ovid died without books, without educated friends, without even a good Latin speaker to talk with, having memories only of the good old life in Rome. His fate has been compared to Oscar Wilde (1854 - 1900) in the Victorian era. But to his credit he continued to write poetry to his death. Finally he even accepted his lot and took a greater interest in the life of Tomi. He learned the local language and, being Ovid, began to write poetry in that language as well.

There is a terrible irony in the life of Ovid. The wealth and security that Ovid and his friends enjoyed in Rome had been won by ordinary Roman soldiers who, over many years, had led harsh and disciplined lives on the edges of the Empire. Only in the last ten years of his life did Ovid become aware of the price the soldiers had paid so that people such as he could live in luxury.

Ovid was convinced that his writings would be immortal. His birthplace, Sulmo, is now the modern town of Sulmona, in whose central square stands a statue of him with the inscription:

Paelignae dicar gloria gentis ego

I shall be called the pride of the Paelignian people
and the initials of his phrase **Sulmo mihi patria est** SMPE 'Sulmo is my birthplace' are used as the municipal motto. During the Middle Ages he was called the Teacher of Love, and in the Renaissance he was by far the most popular Roman poet.

Ovid's Poetry

Ovid's many works can be conveniently divided into three main groups as follows:

(i) Love Poetry - consisting principally of three works *Amores*, *Heroides* and *Ars Amatoria*, and completed before AD 2. These works are witty, entertaining and sophisticated. They are said to show a remarkable grasp of female psychology, but, though Ovid shows pity for the people whose minds he is analysing, he also shows his readers how to take advantage of them so that he appears to us to be rather heartless at times at this stage of his career. The *Heroides* are love poems written in the form of imaginary letters in verse from various heroines of legend to their absent lovers or husbands.

(ii) Mythological Poetry - written between AD 2 and AD 8 and consisting of:

(a) *Metamorphoses* - Ovid's greatest and most influential work. It is a remarkable collection in 15 books of Greek and Roman myths in which the characters are 'metamorphosed' or transformed into a totally different form or shape, for example, into birds or trees. The period covered extends from the creation of the world down to the 'metamorphosis' of Julius Caesar into a comet after his assassination. This poem has been a rich source of inspiration for artists of all kinds, providing material for stories, plays, operas, paintings, sculptures and other poems up to the present day. It is also the most complete account we possess of the wonderful world of Greek mythology and for this reason is a priceless treasure which survives from the ancient world. The stories tumble out, one after the other, with an excellence that never flags.

(b) *Fasti* - in this work Ovid attempts to give the origins of the major Roman festivals, devoting a book to each month. Ovid weaves old stories and legends around the various feast days, making the work a vital source of Roman folk-legend, mythology, religion and customs. He recreates beautifully the atmosphere of rural Latium - its groves, springs, gods, nymphs and country folk. Because of his exile he failed to complete this work.

(iii) The Poems of Exile

(a) *Tristia* - consisting of 49 elegies in 5 books and (b) *Epistulae ex Ponto* - which are 46 letters in verse in 4 books. Both works consist, for the most part, of descriptions of his place of exile and of pathetic pleas to be recalled to Rome. They are full of depression and self-pity. There is a moving description of his last night in Rome, whose sophisticated pleasures he had to leave forever; also his touching autobiography. We feel genuine pity for the society poet in Tomi when we read of the terrible winters there, of barbarian invasions across the frozen Danube River with the ageing poet having to take his turn at sentry duty.



***"Happy is the man who
has broken the chains
which hurt the mind,
and has given up
worrying once and for
all."***

Ovid

Ovid Fasti Book 4 Lines 425-544

Introduction

Venus, goddess of love, was determined to assert her power over all creatures, divine as well as human. She therefore commissioned her son Cupid to fire his sharpest dart into Pluto, god of the Underworld, and to make him fall passionately in love with Proserpine (Persephone in Greek), the young and innocent daughter of Ceres, goddess of fertility and growth.

Pluto saw the girl and carried her off into the kingdom of the dead. Meanwhile, the distraught mother searched the world over for her beloved child until she came to Sicily and saw the girdle of Proserpine's tunic floating on the waters of a lake. She still did not know where her daughter was and in her anger and frustration, she cursed the earth and made the harvests fail. Soon people were dying of hunger.

Finally, Arethusa, the river which flows partly beneath the earth, told Ceres that Proserpine was in the Underworld, ruling there as queen and consort of Pluto. Ceres went straight to Jupiter and demanded that Pluto give back her daughter. Pluto agreed, provided only that Proserpine had not tasted any of the food of Hades.

But Proserpine had unwittingly eaten some seeds of a pomegranate in Pluto's gardens and so, by the decree of the Fates, could never completely leave the Underworld. Eating the food of her host put her in his thrall, an idea common in myth.

Jupiter's solution was to divide the year in two. Proserpine spends half the year with her mother and half with her husband.



Ovid Fasti Book 4 Lines 425-544

The abduction of Persephone

filia, consuetis ut erat comitata puellis,
errabat nudo per sua prata pede.
tot fuerant illic, quot habet natura, colores,
pictaque dissimili flore nitebat humus.
quam simul adspexit, 'comites, accedite' dixit
'et mecum plenos flore referte sinus.'
plurima lecta rosa est, sunt et sine nomine flores:
ipsa crocos tenues liliaque alba legit.
carpendi studio paulatim longius itur,
et dominam casu nulla secuta comes.
hanc videt et visam patruus velociter aufert
regnaque caeruleis in sua portat equis.



The Rape of Proserpina by Bernini - Galleria Borghese, Rome

Attended, as was usual, by her friends, her daughter wandered barefoot through the familiar meadows.

All the colours that nature possesses were (displayed) there, and the multi-coloured earth was gleaming with different flowers.

As soon as she saw it, she said, 'Come here to me, friends, and with me, fill the fold of my garment with lapfuls of flowers'. Many a rose was picked, and flowers without a name. (Persephone) herself plucked dainty crocuses and white lilies.

Intent on gathering, she gradually strayed afar, and it chanced that none of her companions followed their mistress. (Dis / Pluto: her uncle) saw her and no sooner did he see her than did he swiftly abduct her and carry her off on a dark horse to his realm.

Glossary:

1. **consuetus:** as usual
2. **partum:** meadow
4. **pictus:** multi-coloured **dissimili:** 'of various kinds' **nitere:** to gleam **humus:** ground
5. **simul:** as soon as
6. **replere:** to fill **sinus:** fold of garment

7. **legere:** to pick

8. **carpere:** to pluck 9. **paulatim:** gradually **itur:** from **ire** 'she went'.

9. **casu:** by chance

10. **patruus:** Pluto was Ceres' brother.

11. **caeruleus:** dark

Notes:

Note Ovid's choice of flowers for Persephone and their colours. The lily was a symbol of the Greek goddess Hera (Roman: Juno), again showing purity and innocence. One tale tells of lilies springing up from drops of milk spilled from Hera's breast as she nursed Heracles.

Another tells a story of how the lily acquired its pistil: as Venus rose from the ocean, she saw a lily and, jealous of the beauty of the pure-white flower, created an ugly pistil that came up from its centre, thereby marring its beauty. This story accounts for the lily's additional association with fertility and eroticism. Lilies were associated with death as well, signifying that in death, one regained one's lost innocence and purity.



Ovid Fasti Book 4 Lines 519-530

Sympathy for Ceres

'Sospes eas, semperque parens; mihi filia rapta est.

heu! melior quanto sors tua sorte mea est!'

dixit: et ut lacrimae, (neque enim lacrimare deorum est),

decidit in tepidos lucida gutta sinus.

flent partier molles animis birgoque senexque:

e quibus haec iusti verba fuere senis:

'sic tibi, quam quereris raptam, sit filia sospes,

surge: nec exiguae despice tecta casae.'

cui dea, 'duc,' inquit, 'scisti qua cogere posses.'

Seque levat saxo, subsequiturque senem

dux comiti narrat, quam sit sibi filius aeger,

nec capiat somnos, invigiletque malis

'Be safe, and may a parent's (joy) be yours forever. My daughter has been taken from me.

Alas! How much better is your fate than mine!'

She spoke, and like a tear, (for Gods can never weep)

A crystal clear droplet fell on her warm breast.

They wept together with her, those tender hearts, the man and the virgin girl:

Of whom these were the word of the righteous old man:

'So may the ravished daughter whom you seek be restored safe to you;

Arise: and do not despise the shelter of my (humble) cramped abode.'

To him the goddess replied, 'Lead on, you have found a way to force me.'

And she rose from the stone and followed the old man, the leader informed his companion

how his son was sick

And unable to sleep and was kept awake by his nightmare

Glossary:

Sospes –itis (adj): safe and sound, lucky

Rapta est: rapto, are, avi, atum: sieze and carry off

Sors, sortis (f): fate

Ut: like

Gutta- ae: drop, spot

Sinus: breast

Flere (2): to cry

Pariter: together

Queri: to lament

Exiguus: cramped, small

Note: Ceres, in her search for her daughter, came across an old man who was on his way home after foraging for acorns and berries, and fetching dry wood for the fire. With him was his little daughter who was driving home two goats from the hill. His son was at home, sick in bed. Ceres was dressed as an old woman, so they did not know who she was. The little girl and her father stopped and tried to persuade Ceres to take shelter in their hut. She refused and told them that her daughter had been taken from her...

