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**OVID'S PONTIC EPISTLES TO HIS WIFE.****Idowu Mojeed Alade,**

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**Abstract**

Focusing on Ovid's two letters to his wife in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, this investigation examines the personal narrative of exile as expressed through Publius Ovidius Naso. Adopting a diachronic approach, the study aims to foster a understanding of Ovid's letters not merely as literary artifacts but as windows to the socio-emotional landscape of Augustan Rome. Standard Ovidian research predominantly centres on his poetry's literary merits, often neglecting the rich historical context these letters provide. Therefore, this paper contributes to scholarship by foregrounding the historical and emotional realities of Ovid's domestic life, political turmoil and the institution of marriage in ancient Rome. This work employs a multi-disciplinary methodology. It integrates a philological examination of the texts with historical analysis, anchored by a theoretical framework based on Roman social history and epistolary theory. Ovid's discourse provides not only testimony to his own psychological condition and personal circumstances but also implies broader implications for understanding gender roles, familial expectations, and the impact of political exile on family dynamics. This study underscores the resilience of personal relationships under the strain of political upheavals. It also indicates the need for a reassessment of the value of literary sources in historical reconstructions, advocating for their recognition as more than metaphorical or poetic devices.

**Keywords:** Ovid, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, *Tristia*, Augustan Rome, Tomis.

**Introduction**

The art of letter writing has long been an intrinsic part of the human experience, serving as a tool for personal expression and historical inquiry. This study investigates the epistolary works of the Roman poet, Ovid. These letters, beyond literary artifacts, serve as a window into the intimate thoughts and societal conditions of ancient Rome. Ovid is best known for his mythological epic, *The Metamorphoses*, and his didactic poem on love, *Ars Amatoria*. However, his lesser-studied *Epistulae*, written during his exile in Tomis,<sup>1</sup> are important for

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<sup>1</sup> Also spelt Tomi or Tomos. A city of Pontus, close to the mouth of the Danube, and, according to Ovid, inhospitable and with uncivilized residents. Present day

understanding exilic life. These letters provide a blend of personal sentiment and artistic creation, making them unique within Latin literature. Despite the critical acclaim of Ovid's works, the scholarship often overlooks the layers of personal experience that inform his exilic writings. These letters are not just the laments of a poet in exile but also offer a narrative that echoes the wider historical ambiance of the Augustan regime. This research aims, firstly, to reconstruct aspects of Roman society during the Augustan era. Secondly, it intends to enrich historical and literary historiography by exploring the epistolary form not just as a literary device but as a repository of historical evidence, showcasing the value of Ovid's correspondence for understanding both his psyche and his era's sociopolitical climate.

### Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Ovid's works has traditionally focused on his poetry, particularly *Metamorphoses*, *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*. These works have been lauded for their stylistic innovation, mythological tapestry and keen insights into love and relationships within Roman society. Comprehensive studies have dissected his use of elegiac meter, his narrative structure in mythological retellings and the complex interplay between eroticism and morality. Ovid's exilic letters, *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, though critically evaluated, have not received attention commensurate with his other works. This uneven focus has left a gap in understanding the full spectrum of Ovid's literary significance. The letters penned from exile reveal a personal aspect of the poet's life, which contrasts with, and yet illuminates, the more public persona evident in his poetry. These letters, often couched in a tone of plaintive nostalgia, also serve as a reflection of the socio-political conditions of the Augustan regime. Ronald Syme's *History in Ovid*<sup>2</sup> offers one of the earliest comprehensive analyses of the political events that cast a shadow over Ovid's poetry. Syme argues that the themes of exile in Ovid's works must be read against the backdrop of Augustan policies, thereby contributing significantly to our understanding of the period. However, his focus relies more on the political aspect and less on the personal narratives inherent in Ovid's correspondence. The use of epistolary evidence to reconstruct historical contexts has been explored by scholars such as Peter White. In *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome*,<sup>3</sup> White examines the social networks and functions of poetical letters, providing insights into the manner in which such texts can reflect societal norms and relations. White's approach is general, not providing the intimate details found in Ovid's

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Constanța, Romania, founded around 600 BC. Tomis belonged to the Roman Province of Dacia.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Syme, *History in Ovid* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Peter White, *Promised Verse: Poets in the Society of Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993; 2013).

correspondence to his wife. Moving into the intimate realms depicted in Ovid's letters, scholars like Barbara Levick, in *Tiberius the Politician*,<sup>4</sup> consider the personal repercussions of political rule in Augustan Rome, shedding light on the impact of political exile on familial relations. While providing a critical examination of the period, Levick's work does not concentrate on Ovid's personal letters specifically. The exploration of matrimonial dynamics can be found in the works of Elaine Fantham. The understanding of Roman legal systems as experienced by individuals has been furthered by contributions from scholars such as Thomas McGinn in his book, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: a Study of Social History and the Brothel*.<sup>5</sup> Though McGinn's focus is on prostitution, he provides detailed descriptions of legal frameworks and their implications for Roman citizens, which could indirectly inform the milieu in which Ovid and his wife communicated. Furthermore, in *Ovid and the Fasti: an Historical Study*,<sup>6</sup> Herbert-Brown provides insights into Ovid's exile alongside his narrative on Roman religious festivals, enhancing our understanding of the socio-political atmospheres Ovid might be alluding to in his letters. Her work illustrates the intertwining of Ovid's personal narrative with the religious and political climate of his time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study employs an interpretative framework known as historical contextualism. This theoretical approach stresses the significance of understanding texts within their specific historical and cultural contexts. Ovid's writings become a reflective mirror of his time, encapsulating the prevailing thoughts, social norms, mores, political ideologies and even the legal frameworks. His exilic letters are not merely personal expressions of grief and solitude; they are vessels carrying the weight of Augustan societal constructs and the poet's responses to them. For Ovid, these circumstances include the political reign of Emperor Augustus, Roman imperialist expansion, the cultural policies during the *Pax Romana* and the legal actions leading to his own personal misfortune; his exile. These components are all critical to understanding the deeper contexts of his epistolary output. In addition to historical contextualism, the study employs reader-response theory to analyse the dynamic interplay between Ovid's text and its ancient and modern readerships. Reader-response theory provides a lens to view the epistles as part of a communicative act, where meaning is not fixed but rather created through

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Levick, *Tiberius the Politician* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas A. J. McGinn, *The Economy of Prostitution in the Roman World: a Study of Social History and the Brothel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> Geraldine Herbert-Brown, *Ovid and the Fasti: An Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

the engagement between the text and its readers. It suggests that a text is not a self-contained object but rather an event that occurs and re-occurs with each new act of reading. Thus, the interpretation of Ovid's letters requires an investigation into the expectations, cultural literacy and emotive registers of his contemporary audience. It also implies a reflexive look at how modern readers, equipped with their own cultural and temporal sensibilities, reconstruct these letters and their significance. There is a dynamic process of meaning-making that extends from the time of the text's creation through to its reception in the present day. Reader-response theory posits that textuality and interpretation are not only about the signs on a page but about how those signs interact with the cognitive and emotional frameworks of readers. Ovid's text, rich in rhetorical devices, imagery and allusions to myth and history, invites active interpretation and emotional involvement. Engaging with his letters thus becomes a process that is both analytical and empathetic, as his poetic lamentations call for a reader's awareness of literary technique as well as sensitivity to human distress. Combining historical contextualism with reader-response theory, the study of Ovid's letters becomes a dual exploration of how the letters reflect their time and, simultaneously, how they communicate and resonate over the centuries..

### **Methodology**

The methodology employed in this study encompasses a multi-disciplinary approach, integrating philological analysis of Ovid's letters with historical examination. Specifically, the two letters addressed to Ovid's wife in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, Ep. 1.4 and 3.1, were subjected to content analysis to elucidate key themes pertaining to Ovid's relationship with his wife and the socio-cultural backdrop of Augustan Rome. The analysis was further supported by secondary sources, including pertinent works by modern scholars, to contextualize and expand upon the findings. This comprehensive methodology aims to provide a robust understanding of Ovid's personal narrative of exile and its implications for his domestic life and the broader socio-political atmosphere of ancient Rome.

### **Ovid: Life, Works and Exile.<sup>7</sup>**

Ovid was one of the most important personalities among the writers in Augustan Rome. In the year A.D. 8 Ovid was banished by the order of the Emperor Augustus. The precise reason behind the banishment is still a riddle though Ovid mentions two reasons: first, the *Ars Amatoria*, a collection of poems on how to seduce; second, a hidden reason he refers to simply as 'his indiscretion.' This,

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<sup>7</sup> The claim that Ovid's exile was not a historical event but a literary device is a minority view among scholars such as O. Janssen, J.J. Hartman and A.D. Fitton Brown. It has not supplanted the more traditional historical view that there was indeed an exile.

according to scholars, is likely to be the main reason behind the banishment since the *Ars Amatoria* had been published, and was already in the public domain, ten years before the sentence of exile. Ovid made it known that he had committed neither murder nor treason yet what he had done must continue to be a top secret. He maintains that he had only been aware of an offence that he did not reveal. What then was the offence? Who were those involved? Was it the factional struggle between the Julians and the Claudians for the succession? Was the offence political, religious or moral? Was it the immoral nature of some of his poems? Had he witnessed an immoral act by a member of Augustus' family?<sup>8</sup> Had he had an affair with Julia? We would probably never have the precise answer. *Relegatio*, the legal order that was used in exiling Ovid, allowed him to retain civic rights which exiles were traditionally ripped off. Despite this, *exsilium* would have allowed him to move anywhere outside Rome whereas *relegatio* restricted him to Tomis. Though the precise reason behind Ovid's banishment remains open to discussion, the circumstances in which he composed his *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, his primary and overwhelming aim in writing these works, are abundantly clear; he was suffering physical hardship, mental anguish and he craved pardon and the right to return to Rome, or, at least, permission to move to a more agreeable location. Ovid's sincerity is not in doubt, and equally, there is no reason to doubt his love and affection in the poetic epistles to his wife.

Publius Ovidius Naso was born at Sulmo, 90 miles from Rome, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March 43 BC. Ovid became a romantic poet early in life while he also held a number of offices within the Roman administrative system. He was a city magistrate, one of the *vigintiviri*,<sup>9</sup> and, later, a member of the *centumviri*.<sup>10</sup> Ovid studied law and rhetoric but later abandoned law for poetry, against his father's wishes, who had considered poetry useless and unprofitable. By the age of 30, Ovid had married three times with both the first and second marriages ending in divorce. The third wife, subject of these exile letters, was a member of the Fabii family, a widow, with a daughter<sup>11</sup> from the previous marriage. When Ovid was 51 years old, in 8 AD, Emperor Augustus banished him. He had appealed to Augustus repeatedly for pardon to either return to Rome or other places more habitable. All Ovid's pleas for pardon or relocation were disregarded by Augustus and, later, Tiberius. Ovid died at Tomis after the 9<sup>th</sup> year of exile at age 59 or 60. While departing for exile he had requested his wife to remain in

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<sup>8</sup> Julia, Augustus' granddaughter was also banished about this time. She was banished for her extreme profligacy.

<sup>9</sup> A college of twenty magistrates responsible for various administrative tasks.

<sup>10</sup> 105 officers elected from the 35 tribes of Rome, assisting the Praetor in property dispute and litigation.

<sup>11</sup> *Tristia* 4.10 talks about a daughter, and two grand daughters. A step daughter, Perilla is mentioned elsewhere.

Rome that she could facilitate either the Emperor's complete pardon or a less severe sentence using her influence with Livia, Augustus' wife. Ovid wrote *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*<sup>12</sup> *Amores*,<sup>13</sup> *Heroides*,<sup>14</sup> *Ars Amatoria*,<sup>15</sup> *Remedium Amoris*,<sup>16</sup> *Metamorphosis*,<sup>17</sup> and *Fasti*.<sup>18</sup> On the way to Tomis Ovid composed the First Book of *Tristia*.<sup>19</sup> Other Books of *Tristia* he wrote during the succeeding years. He also addressed letters to his friends and wife in the *Pontic Epistles*.

Ovid is known to have been married three times, but very little is known about his wives. The first wife of Ovid is reported to have been a woman by the name of Corinna, who is purported to be the inspiration behind many of Ovid's love poems. Some scholars have debated whether Corinna was an actual historical figure or simply a poetic creation by Ovid. The second wife is also largely unknown. It is believed that she was a noblewoman. The third and final wife of Ovid remains shrouded in mystery. Despite the lofty qualities attributed to her in Ovid's writings, the identity and details of their relationship remain elusive. In Lewis' 2013 article, *The Family Relationships of Ovid's Third Wife: A Reconsideration*, the author conducts an analysis of the paternal, maternal and prior relationships of Ovid's third wife. The conclusion drawn from the analysis is that she was the daughter of Paullus Fabius Maximus, the niece of Ser. Sulpicius Rufus, and the former wife of Pompeius Macer. The lack of information about Ovid's wives is indicative of the restricted focus on male figures in historical narratives, leading to the neglect of the personal lives and experiences of women, including those closely associated with renowned figures such as Ovid.

#### ***Epistulae Ex Ponto***<sup>20</sup>

*Tristia*, in five books, was on Ovid's journey to Tomis, written between AD 9 to 12 while *Epistulae ex Ponto* was composed between AD 13 and 16. *Epistulae* has four books: book one, 10 letters; book two, 11 letters; book three, nine letters; and book four, 16 letters. Poetic epistles were in existence before Ovid.

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<sup>12</sup> *On Cosmetics.*

<sup>13</sup> *Loves.*

<sup>14</sup> *The Heroines.*

<sup>15</sup> *The Art of Love.*

<sup>16</sup> *The Cure for love.*

<sup>17</sup> His major work. He tried to burn it when he received the sentence of exile but copies were already in circulation with friends.

<sup>18</sup> *The Roman Calendar.*

<sup>19</sup> *Sorrows.*

<sup>20</sup> *Letters from the Black Sea.*

Horace and Propertius, for example, had some poetic epistles, but Ovid's originality lies in his dramatic monologue. Four major themes were identified in these letters: general lamentations and craving for pity; deep praise and intense expressions of love for his wife; requests to approach the Emperor for pardon or relocation; and mythical cum philosophical allusions. Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* is a collection of poetry composed of four books of elegiac letters. The Augustan period (27 B.C. to A.D. 14) was a time when Rome was transitioning from a Republic to a Principate with Augustus as its first Emperor. This period is often characterised by political stability, the flourishing of arts, and the strong enforcement of moral legislation. In the cultural context of the Augustan period, literature and the arts were used to promote the values and legitimacy of Augustus's regime. Writers who did not align with these values could be subject to censorship or, as in Ovid's case, harsher penalties. Ovid's exile is partially a reflection of the cultural and political powers exerted by the imperial regime on artists and intellectuals.

**Ovid's Letter to His Wife I: *Epistulae Ex Ponto* Book 1:4**

Letter 4 revolved around the themes of exile, loyalty, the power of literary legacy and personal suffering. Ovid begins by acknowledging the physical manifestations of aging, such as whitening hair and wrinkles, and the diminishing physical strength. He mentions how the "games of youth" no longer bring him joy, signifying the loss of vitality and pleasure in life.

iam mihi deterior canis aspergitur aetas,  
iamque meos vultus ruga senilis arat .  
iam vigor et quasso languent in corpore vires, nec,  
iuveni lusus qui placuere, iuvant. Lines 1-4

Now the decline of life is on me, whitening my hair,  
now the wrinkles of age are furrowing my face:  
now strength and vigour ebb in my weakened body,  
the games of youth that pleased, no longer delight.<sup>21</sup>

The comparison of himself to broken oxen and overworked soil reflects the idea that continuous strain and suffering have prematurely aged him.

cernis ut in duris—et quid bove firmius?—arvis  
fortia taurorum corpora frangat opus.  
quae numquam vacuo solita est cessare novali,  
fructibus assiduis lassa senescit humus. Lines 11-14

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<sup>21</sup> All translation from *Poetry in Translation* by A. S. Kline.

You know how the sturdy oxen are broken in body  
by the stubborn earth – and what's stronger than an ox?  
The soil that's never allowed to lie fallow  
decays, wearied by endless production.

Through these analogies, Ovid articulates the toll that his emotional anguish and continual suffering have taken on him, suggesting that his physical decline is a result of both natural aging and the profound distress caused by his exile. Ovid thereafter contrasts his hardships with those of Jason in quest for the Golden Fleece. He asserts that his own tribulations have been more challenging than Jason's, despite Jason's fame.

aspice, in has partis quod venerit Aesone natus,  
quam laudem a sera posteritate ferat.  
at labor illius nostro leviorque minorque est,  
si modo non verum nomina magna premunt,  
ille est in Pontum Pelia mittente profectus,  
qui vix Thessaliae fine timendus erat. Lines 23-28.

Look what praise Jason, the son of Aeson, receives  
from later ages because he came to this region.  
Yet his toil was less and lighter than mine,  
if great fame didn't merely hide the truth.  
He headed for Pontus, sent there by Pelias,  
who was scarcely feared beyond Thessaly's border.

Ovid describes the harsh conditions of his exile; he is physically and psychologically distant from the familiar comforts and social life of Rome. The imagery is of the bleak life he leads: the inhospitable landscape, the language barrier with the Getae and the constant threat of attack from nearby tribes. The loyalty of his wife is the major subject. He praises her commitment unlike his own abandonment by friends. Ovid also expresses a belief in the potency of his poetry. Despite his current fate, he is convinced that his works will outlive him and, through them, his memory will survive. More importantly, this letter also reflects on traditional Roman gender expectations. While Ovid's wife is situated in a supportive role, her strength and action are beyond normal expectations of women being passive figures. In this, Ovid's portrayal is both conservative and progressive. He attributes his misfortune to fate, a common belief of his era. At the same time he blames the impact of his own contribution in assisting fate due to the unnamed error that he committed. This letter illustrates the personal effects of political decisions in the Augustan era and demonstrates the power dynamic between the Emperor and Rome's literary figures.



The portrayal of Ovid's wife upholds the Roman ideals of *fides*<sup>22</sup> and *castitas*,<sup>23</sup> that she embodies the major attributes of traditional Roman matron. Although Ovid's works had contradicted Augustan moral reforms, his praise of his wife's virtues aligned with Augustan ideals for women. The letter closes with the usual expression of longing for his wife. Ovid seeks to see his wife again, expressing a desire to observe the effects of their shared troubles on her and to console her.

### **Ovid's Letter to His Wife II: *Epistulae Ex Ponto* Book 3:1**

The poem is written in elegiac couplets, a traditional form used for love and lamentation, suitable for Ovid's themes of personal loss and desire for forgiveness. In this letter Ovid reflects on his exile to the hostile and cold location of Tomis, expressing his yearning for a less harsh place and the emotional toll it takes on him and his wife.

Aequor Iasonio pulsatum remige primum  
 quaeque nec hoste fero nec niue, terra, cares,  
 ecquod erit tempus quo uos ego Naso relinquam,  
 in minus hostili iussus abesse loco?  
 An mihi barbaria uiuendum semper in ista  
 inque Tomitana condar oportet humo? Lines 1-6

Sea, first struck by Jason's oars, and land,  
 never free of savage enemies and snow,  
 will a time come when Ovid is ordered away  
 to a less hostile place, leaves you behind?  
 Surely I ought not, living on in this barbarian  
 country, to be buried in the soil of Tomis?

He begins by painting a picture of the brutal nature of the land and the challenges it presents. He describes the roughness of the climate, the absence of familiar seasonal changes, the barrenness of the land as well as the constant threat of enemies. Ovid's lamentation over his exile and the hardships he and his wife face is evident throughout the letter. He expresses his longing for a different location, where the conditions are less severe and where he can find peace. He communicates his dissatisfaction with the land of Tomis, especially concerning the lack of natural beauty, the absence of familiar experiences and the isolating and dangerous environment.

Ovid thereafter urges his wife to play an active role in supporting him during his exile. He reiterates the importance of her unwavering support, the need to maintain their reputation and the significance of her actions being observed on a

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<sup>22</sup> Trustworthiness.

<sup>23</sup> Chastity.

grand stage.

pectore te toto cunctisque incumbere nervis  
et niti pro me nocte dieque decet.  
utque iuvent alii, tu debes vincere amicos,  
uxor, et ad partis prima venire tuas.  
magna tibi imposita est nostris persona libellis:  
coniugis exemplum diceris esse bonae. Lines 39-44

You should work for me day and night, strain  
with a full heart and with every sinew.  
And you must win our friends, so others help,  
wife, and appear the leader of your party.  
The role imposed on you in my books is a great one:  
you're spoken of as the model of a good wife.

Ovid highlights the role of fate in giving him notoriety through his exile and writings and stresses the impact of his wife's conduct on their public image.

notior est factus Capaneus a fulminis ictu.  
notus humo mersis Amphiarus equis,  
si minus errasset, notus minus esset Ulixes:  
magna Philoctetae vulnere fama suo est. Lines 51-54

Fate has exposed me to the public gaze,  
and given me more notoriety than before.  
Capaneus was made more famous when the lightning struck:  
Amphiarus when his horses were swallowed by the earth.  
Ulysses would have been less known if he'd wandered less:  
Philoctetes' great fame derived from his wound.

Ovid's descriptions of his surroundings and his plea to his wife to uphold their reputation convey the depth of his suffering and his desire for their circumstances to improve. It also presents the complexities of personal and public life during exile and the longing for understanding and support from loved ones. The letter reveals an interplay of emotions, social expectations and marital dynamics with a mixture of poetic persuasion, emotional appeal and practical demands. He acknowledges the public scrutiny of his wife's conduct and the importance of her virtuous behaviour in the eyes of others. He suggests that her actions will be scrutinised by many, indicating the significance of her role in upholding their social standing. This reflects the social norms and expectations of the time, where the conduct of a wife was a matter of great importance not only for her husband but for their reputation within the community. He then acknowledges the potential criticisms and jealousies she may face, highlighting the delicate balance she needs to maintain between public

perception and personal duty. Ovid implores his wife to ensure that no one can doubt her commitment to his well being and safety, especially in his weakened state.

This letter also exposes Ovid's vulnerability and dependence on his wife as he describes his physical decline and the need for her support. He appeals to her sense of duty and love with her responsibility to uphold their mutual vows and maintain their honour in his absence. Ovid's reference to historical and mythological examples such as Penelope and Laodamia serves as examples of the extent women have gone to fulfill their marital obligations. The letter intertwines practical requests with emotional entreaties with the difficulties presented under the strain of separation and adversity. Evadne was known for sacrificing herself to be with her deceased husband while Alcestis volunteered to die in place of her husband, King Admetus. Ovid wishes his wife to do all in her power to get him pardoned through Augustus' wife.

si mea mors redimenda tua, quod abominor, esset,  
 Admeti coniunx, quam sequereris, erat.  
 aemula Penelopes fieres, si fraude pudica  
 instantis velles fallere nupta procos.  
 si comes extincti Manes sequerere mariti,  
 esset dux facti Laodamia tui. Lines 105-10

Had you to redeem my death, a detestable idea,  
 Alcestis, Admetus's wife would be your model.  
 You'd emulate Penelope if, by chaste deceit, you wished  
 to be the bride misleading insistent suitors.  
 If you followed your dead husband to the shadows,  
 Laodamia would be your guide in the act.

He advises his wife on the timing and manner of her approach. He suggests a strategic approach, cautioning against a hasty or ill-timed plea and for her to be mindful of the political climate of the city. This reflects Ovid's grasp of the intricacies of political and social dynamics of Rome at that time. Ovid suggests the importance of performing rituals and invoking the divine in her plea, aligning with the cultural and religious practices of the time. He ties her appeal to the favour of the gods, represented by Augustus and his wife. This letter expresses deep sorrow over his separation from his wife and the comforts of his former life in Rome. This points to the strong bonds of marriage and family during the Augustan age. The letter is intended to remind his wife of their love and loyalty and urge her to continue advocating for his return to Rome. Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, initiated moral legislation which promoted

traditional family values as well as a larger sense of *Romanitas*.<sup>24</sup> Ovid's previous works, particularly the *Ars Amatoria*, were seen as antithetical to these moral reforms and are considered a possible cause of his exile. This era was marked by the consolidation of Augustus's power. Ovid's banishment demonstrates both Augustus's control over Rome's cultural norms and the vulnerability of a prominent figure like Ovid under the empire's central authority. Ovid's depiction of his wife's efforts is notable; women in the Augustan period could wield significant influence in the private, and by extension, public spheres. This letter constitutes indirect evidence of the subtle pathways of women's agency in ancient Rome and an example of an appeal to public sympathy and intervention through literary creation, reflecting the interplay between literature and politics.

Ovid's portrayal of his own character is torn between his past as a poet of love, which may have led to his exile, and his present image as an aggrieved husband and loyal subject longing for absolution. Ovid presents himself and wife as loving couples separated by the gods; Augustus and Livia, thus the gods must be appeased by the wife as he himself is doing through his epistles. Ideal Roman wife and ideal Roman husband, as envisaged by Augustus, cruelly separated. Ovid contrasts the harsh present with the idyllic past, the barbarous land of his exile with the civilized world of Rome, and his current infamy with his former glory. These literary contrasts are crafted to underline the transformation brought by his exile. This letter articulates the distress of a Roman exile during the Augustan period and serves as a channel for understanding the complex societal dynamics of that era. Historically, it sheds light on the Augustan moral reforms, the role of literature in ancient Rome and the sociocultural conditions of the time, including the status of women and family norms. The letter is a fusion of emotional appeal and politically astute literature in an era where personal misfortune could intersect prominently with the broad narratives of power and cultural identity. The letter is framed as a direct address to his wife, though it is also intended for a wider audience. Ovid describes his isolation among the barbarians of Tomis, presenting an image of a cultured Roman lost among uncivilized people. He frequently reiterates his love and dedication to his wife, praising her loyalty and stoicism in facing the disgrace that had befallen them. Ovid pleads with his wife to remember him, to remain loyal, and to support him by advocating for his return. He asserts that his suffering and their mutual loyalty would be immortalized in his poetry, despite his physical absence. Ovid sets up contrasts between his past life and his current state, between Rome and Tomis, between joy and suffering, which enhances the emotional impact of the letter. Although portrayed as personal communication, the audience is keenly aware of its public nature. Readers would recognize Ovid's rhetorical skill, his manipulation of elegiac tradition for expressing personal woe and the embedded

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<sup>24</sup> Roman identity.

hope that public sympathy might influence his situation.

Rome serves not just as a city but as a symbol for Ovid's lost status, his past life, and the pinnacle of civilization. The bitter setting of Tomis often stands for Ovid's inner turmoil, representing the brutality of his punishment. *Epistulae ex Ponto* presents the struggle of an exiled poet, the beauty and craft of Roman poetry and the interplay of personal and political themes in a manner that is both personally expressive and universally resonant. Through his masterful use of elegiac tradition, rhetorical technique and imagery, Ovid ensures that his voice is heard across centuries, resonating with anyone who has experienced the pain of separation and the longing for a home and loved ones left behind.

#### **Ovid, Augustan Justice and Injustice.**

Since Ovid was not considered a political or security threat, Augustus allowed him to live and did not confiscate his properties. If Ovid had been bolder, he might have considered suicide. However, without the emperor's specific order, this could have led to fatal consequences for his family, as well as the denial of a proper burial for his body and potential confiscation of his properties. Ovid may have also assumed that Augustus would eventually show him clemency. It is noteworthy that even Emperor Tiberius, who succeeded Augustus, was unwilling to recall Ovid.

In the context of Roman legal mechanisms, Ovid's letters offer a compelling critique and a palpable sense of injustice. Ovid's banishment came with the possibility of a recall by the Emperor, he therefore left his wife at Rome in order to continue, with the assistance of friends, to appeal to Augustus. Augustus was usually in the manner of granting such pardons, or a mitigation of the terms. Ovid's wife had some influence with Livia. Augustus had banished his own daughter; and later his own grandchildren. Ovid's use of personal narrative serves to reveal the power dynamics at play within Augustan Rome, alongside the roles and expectations of gender and social conduct. Ovid's interactions and admonitions addressed to friends, protectors and family delineate the contours of social relationships and expectations, thus mapping out the societal norms and boundaries. The study's results demonstrate that Ovid's epistolary responses to his circumstance are deeply entrenched within the societal structures of the time. His lamentations reach beyond the personal, touching upon the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, the rigid confines within which patrons and clients operated, and the limits of personal agency under an increasingly authoritarian regime. Taken together, these enrich the understanding of the complex fabric of Augustan society, shedding light on a transformative era through personal and political dimensions of Ovid's epistolary expressions. Through the exploration of these letters, an image of Ovid emerges not only as a poet of personal woes but also as a commentator on the socio-political fabric of his society. The dualities of personal and public, emotion and politics, individual

and empire, are intertwined throughout the *Epistulae*, offering a rich field of study into the Roman world as experienced by one of its most eloquent poets.

### **Conclusion**

This study, rooted in the intertwining branches of historical research and literary analysis, aimed to offer a reconstruction of Roman societal norms and historical events through the lens of Ovid's exilic letters. The analysis of Ovid's letters has illuminated not just the subjective experiences of a man in exile but also shed light on the broader socio-political ambiance of the Augustan regime, marked by its social stratifications, moral legislation and control of public and private life. The poet's narrative, articulately woven into his correspondence, acted as a conduit through which we glimpsed the era's cultural values and paradoxes. The feelings of despair reiterated the severity of exile as a penitentiary mechanism within Roman law, evidencing often oppressive legal structures of the time. Furthermore, Ovid's reflections on gender roles, social conduct and the relationships between the classes presented a narrative on the expected behaviours and the realities of transgression against Augustan moral reforms. His letters depicted a society caught in the transition, struggling to align itself with the ideologically charged mandates from the highest echelons of power. This investigation into Ovid's epistles has emphasised the value of personal letters as primary historical sources. Their informal nature often bypasses the artifices of public discourse and propaganda, offering raw reflections of individual sentiment that serve as a counterpoint to more formalised historical narratives. This study accentuated the relevance of such personal documents in complementing our understanding of the past.

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