

Ovid's *Amores*

The *Amores* consists of a three-book collection (fifteen, twenty, and fifteen poems) of largely amatory elegies published not before 16 BCE and perhaps between 12 and 7 BCE. The *Amores* as we have it is a second edition; Ovid tells us in an “editorial” epigram that it was first published as five books. Like his predecessors Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius, whom he self-consciously follows, Ovid’s collection consists mainly of first-person narrative, ostensibly autobiographical erotic poems exploring the author/lover’s affairs. His “girlfriend” (*puella*), who assumes less prominence than his predecessors’ *puellae*, is suitably poetically named Corinna (acknowledging Catullus’s Lesbia).

Introduction to Ovid's *Amores* (William Turpin)

These are poems in elegiac couplets about a love affair (or affairs). Ovid was firmly within an established tradition. Catullus (c. 84 to 54 BC), wrote not only epigrams, but longer poems in elegiac couplets; he also gave to many of his poems a unifying story, about a difficult love affair with the woman he called Lesbia. He was followed by C. Cornelius Gallus (c. 70 to 27 or 26 BC), who seems to have written four books of love poetry exclusively in elegiac couplets, also probably called *Amores*. Gallus’ verses do not survive, but they depicted his affair with a famous actress of the day named Cytheris, whom he calls Lycoris. Gallus seems to have done much to establish the conventional figure of the poet as the broken-hearted lover.

The most important of Ovid’s immediate predecessors was Propertius (born between 54 and 47 BC; died before 2 AD). Propertius published four books of elegies, the first appearing around 28 BC, a few years before Ovid’s first poems in the genre. Like his older contemporaries Vergil (born 70 BC) and Horace (born 65 BC), Propertius came to be a member of the circle of Maecenas, the political advisor of Augustus/ Most of Propertius’ poems concern a romantic affair with a woman he calls Cynthia, and in many of them the poet is portrayed as desperately, even morbidly, uncertain of her affections. Propertius wrote with self-conscious artifice (he claimed to be a

Roman Callimachus), deploying mythological examples that are often obscure.

A near contemporary of Propertius was Albius Tibullus (born between 55 and 48 BC; died in 19 BC), who wrote two books of elegies, the first at about the time of Ovid's first *Amores*. Tibullus' patron was M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus. Ovid, who laments Tibullus' premature death in *Amores* 3.9. Tibullus wrote poems concerning three different love affairs, with women he calls Delia and Nemesis and, in even more striking opposition to Augustan morality, with a young man he calls Marathus. Tibullus' poems are much less mythological than those of Propertius, and the emotions he depicts are much less tortured. A second poet associated with Tibullus was Sulpicia, the niece of Messalla Corvinus. Six of her elegies are preserved in the third book of the Tibullan corpus, and describe an affair with a man she calls Cerinthus.

Ultimately, perhaps, evaluating Ovid's *Amores* requires a first-hand knowledge of the tradition in which he was working; it is a truism of Latin scholarship that Ovid plays with, even mocks, the conventions of his predecessors. But for practical reasons the *Amores* make a good introduction to the genre; Ovid's Latin is relatively straightforward, at least compared to that of Propertius, and he offers a livelier account of the traditional Latin elegist's difficult love-life than either Tibullus or Sulpicia. The figure of the poet-lover that Ovid presents in the *Amores* is also a new departure in the western literary tradition, worth attention in its own right: we get our first hapless, light-hearted, insensitive and selfish womanizer.