

# THE LIFE OF OVID BY POMPONIUS LAETUS



By Frank T. Coulson

*Laetus' life of Ovid, which prefaced his glosses to Ovid's Fasti, has received little scholarly attention. The life is quite different in approach from most humanistic lives of Ovid and is noteworthy for its brief, pithy and scholarly account of the poet. The life continued to be read and was influential well into the age of print.*

Ovid's calendar poem, the *Fasti*, was the object of intense and sustained study in Rome throughout the second half of the Quattrocento.<sup>1</sup> The two major printed commentaries on the poem, and no doubt the commentaries which had the most influence, are those of Paulus Marsus, printed in 1482 at Venice, and Antonius Constantius, printed in 1489 at Rome.<sup>2</sup> These two commentaries were subsequently combined in the edition printed in 1497 at Venice. Politianus, of course, also delivered his magisterial lectures on the poem in Florence in 1481–82.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is also much as yet unedited manuscript evidence for the glossing and commenting on the *Fasti* from about 1450 to 1490, most of which is centered at Rome in the scholarly ambience of Pomponius Laetus. In this article, I wish first to examine the evidence for Laetus's scholarly interest in the *Fasti* – an interest which seems to have started around 1469–70 and continued to around 1490; I shall then focus more closely on his life of Ovid and detail how the life may be considered a truly revolutionary biography in the cultural and intellectual milieu of late fifteenth-century Italy.

As early as the 1450s, we have evidence that Laetus's teacher, Pietro Odo da Montopoli, glossed the *Fasti*. In Vatican City, BAV, Vat. lat. 1595, fols. 254r–351v, we find rubrics for the study of the *Fasti* in Pietro's hand.<sup>4</sup> The comments in this manuscript do not amount to a full commentary but rather serve as divisions and titles to help the reader structure his reading of the poem. Nevertheless, they are an indication of the scholar's interest in the

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to Angela Fritsen for sharing with me her vast knowledge of the printed commentary tradition on the *Fasti* in the Renaissance. I am also indebted to the participants of the colloquium for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup> See, in particular, Fritsen 1995.

<sup>3</sup> Edited in Lo Monaco 1991.

<sup>4</sup> Fritsen 1995.

poem and of his views on its presumed division and structure. Rome, Biblioteca Vallicelliana, R 59 also contains a substantial commentary on the *Fasti*, unpublished and to my knowledge unstudied, attributed to Antonius Volscus.<sup>5</sup> But undoubtedly Laetus was one of the leading lights in Rome for the study of Ovid, and evidence for his work can be found in multiple manuscripts to which I now turn in greater detail.

Vatican City, BAV, Vat. lat. 3264, a deluxe manuscript with glosses on the *Fasti* in the hand of Laetus on the first five folios, dated to 1469–1470, does not have his life of Ovid.<sup>6</sup> It was produced for a private pupil of Laetus and a member of his Academy, Fabio Mazzatosta, and contains the earliest known comments of Laetus on the *Fasti*. The glosses are fairly full on the first five folios and certainly go well beyond the earlier work of Laetus's teacher, Pietro Odo da Montopoli. The glosses have not been edited or fully studied.

Vatican City, BAV, Ottob. lat. 1982 (ca. 1485), fols. 71v–73v, contains notes on the *Fasti* that are not in the hand of Laetus, but are probably written by a student of Laetus and in his scholarly orbit.<sup>7</sup> The glosses remain unedited and unstudied.

Vatican City, BAV, Vat. lat. 3263, autograph, post 1488, contains the life and glosses of Laetus.<sup>8</sup>

Ferrara, Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea, II.141 was identified by Lo Monaco as being in the hand of Laetus (Lo Monaco 1992). The manuscript has Laetus's glosses on the *Fasti* but not the life. Though the manuscript is undated, Lo Monaco, in a private conversation with Angela Fritsen, seemed of the opinion that it may be dated to late in Laetus's career.

Naples, Biblioteca Nazionale, IV F 8 is a direct copy of Vat. lat. 3263. The manuscript was identified by Lo Monaco (Lo Monaco 1992).

One other manuscript, Vatican City, BAV, Ottob. lat. 1526, fols. 68r–119v, has a life of Ovid and glosses to the *Fasti* (incomplete) which are largely drawn from the commentary of Laetus, though they seem to have a few modifications.<sup>9</sup>

Let us now turn to a closer examination of Laetus's life of Ovid.

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<sup>5</sup> The manuscript is briefly mentioned in Kristeller 1963–1997, 2.134. Volscus's commentary on the *Heroides*, on the other hand, was printed and widely disseminated. See Moss 1982 and White 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Catalogued in Fohlen, Jeudy & Riou 1975–, 3.2, 185–186 and Buonocore 1994, 208.

<sup>7</sup> See Bracke 1992, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Catalogued in Fohlen, Jeudy & Riou 1975–, 3.2, 184–185 and Buonocore 1994, 207–208.

<sup>9</sup> Catalogued in Buonocore 1994, 100–101.

Life of Ovid, transcribed from Vatican City, BAV, Vat. lat. 3263, fol. 1r:

Publius Ovidius Naso ante XII Kalendas Aprilis Sulmone in Pelignis natus est, quo anno bello Mutinensi P. Hirtius et C. Pansa consules diem obiere. Honoribus Romae functus. Fuit enim arbiter et triumvir et iudicium inter centumuiros dixit. Sub Plotio Grippo litteris eruditus, deinde apud Marcellum Fuscum rhetorem, cuius auditor fuit, optime declamavit. Admirator plurimum [plurimum *MS*, *quod dubitanter conservavi*]<sup>10</sup> Porcii Latronis fuit, quem adeo studiose audiuit ut multas eius sententias in uersus suos transtulerit. Bonus declamator et ingeniosus habitus est et carmine prosa<m><sup>11</sup> licenter dixit. Ingenii sui adeo amator ut ex hiis que dixit, etiam precantibus amicis, nihil mutauerit. In carminibus uitia [uitia *scripsi*: uitam *MS*] sua non ignorauit sed amauit. Militauit sub M. Varrone; Iulio Grecino grammatico familiaris [Fuscum–familiaris *cf. SEN. contr.*, 2.2.8–9 et 12]. Tandem cum uenisset in suspitionem Augusti, creditus sub nomine Corinnae amasse Iuliam, in exilium missus est. Exulauit Tomis ibique decessit annum agens quinquagesimum. Nouissimum opus lingua Romana scripsit *de Piscibus*, ἀλιεῦτικα appellauit.

(Publius Ovidius Naso was born on the twelfth day before the calends of April [i.e. March 21] at Sulmo in the territory of the Paeligni in the year in which the consuls Hirtius and Pansa lost their lives at the battle of Mutina. He discharged duties at Rome. For he was a judge and a triumvir and as one of the centumviri he pronounced judgement. He was instructed in grammar under Plotius Grippus and then he declaimed superbly in the school of the rhetor Marcellus Fuscus, whose pupil he was. He greatly admired Porcius Latro, whom he listened to so carefully that many of Latro's aphorisms were carried over into Ovid's own verses. He was considered a good declaimer and quite witty, and he freely spoke prose in verse. He was such a great lover of his own intellect that he refused to alter anything he had said, even if his friends begged him to do so. In his poetry he was not unaware of his faults but embraced them. He served in the military under Marcus Varro and was an intimate of the grammarian Julius Graecinus. At length, he fell under suspicion with Augustus, who believed that he had an affair with his daughter Julia under the pseudonym of Corinna, and he was sent into exile. He was exiled to Tomi and died there in his

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<sup>10</sup> The use of the adverbial form *plurimum* with a noun seems to be rather unusual syntax and I have not been able to find any parallels for it.

<sup>11</sup> *prosa<m>*: seems to echo two verses of Ovid from the *Tristia*: *sponte sua carmen numeros ueniebat ad aptos/ et quod temptabam dicere uersus erat* (*Tr.* 4.10.25–26) and what Seneca the Elder says about Ovid's prose: *oratio eius iam tum nihil aliud poterat uideri quam solutum carmen* (Seneca the Elder, *Contr.* 2.2.8). Laetus's use of *licenter* at line 7 also picks up Ovid's *sponte sua* from *Tr.* 4.10.25.

50<sup>th</sup> year. His last work written in Latin he called the *Halieutica*, *On Fish*.)

Laetus's life of Ovid is a remarkable achievement. Short, pithy, concise and chock full of factual information, the life is quite different in its approach and format from the majority of Ovidian biographies circulating during the later fifteenth century. First, unlike his contemporaries, Laetus does not use Ovid's own autobiographical poem, *Tristia* 4.10, as the basis for the structure of his life. On the contrary, he employs secondary sources such as the *Controversiae* of the Elder Seneca to provide details of Ovid's education and schooling missing in other accounts. In particular, the reader is given the names of his early teachers and of the declaimer Porcius Latro for whom he had a great admiration. The teacher Plotius Grippus appears only in the life of Laetus (at the beginning).<sup>12</sup> It may be worth mentioning that Jean Masson, who wrote a 257 page life of Ovid entitled *P. Ovidii Nasonis Vita ordine chronologico sic delineata*,<sup>13</sup> was also troubled by this reference, as was Henri de La Ville de Mirmont, who in 1905, in his biography of Ovid entitled *La jeunesse d'Ovide*, wrote:

D'autre part, tout s'accorde pour démontrer qu'Ovide n'a pas été à l'école de Plotius Grippus, quoiqu'on l'ait prétendu sur la foi d'un érudit calabrais du xv siècle, Pomponius Laetus.<sup>14</sup>

(Moreover, everything indicates that Ovid was not the pupil of Plotius Grippus, although one assumed it on the testimony of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century scholar Pomponius Laetus.)

Among fifteenth-century biographers of Ovid, only Laetus's life maintains that Ovid soldiered under Varro, though Hercules Ciofanus also asserts this fact in his life of Ovid published in 1575.<sup>15</sup> Laetus's statement that Ovid was an intimate of the circle of Julius Graecinus may be a misquotation, as he is probably thinking of Julius Hyginus, who Suetonius, *De Gram.* 20 identified as an intimate friend of Ovid (*fuitque familiarissimus Ovidio poetae*). In one respect Laetus follows the time-worn exegesis of the medieval *accessus* to Ovid, namely in treating of the reasons for exile, where Laetus alleges that Ovid had an affair with Julia, Augustus's daughter, described in the *Amores* under the pseudonym of Corinna. During the Middle Ages, various and sundry reasons were given for Ovid's *error*, including an affair with Julia, an affair with Livia, or the unwitting viewing by Ovid of Augustus-

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<sup>12</sup> I have not been able to find the source for this statement.

<sup>13</sup> Masson 1708, 26–27.

<sup>14</sup> La Ville de Mirmont 1905, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Ciofanus 1581–1583, 27.

tus engaged in pederasty.<sup>16</sup> The life of Laetus, nearly alone amongst the lives of Ovid circulating in Renaissance Italy, references Ovid's fragmentary work, the *Halieutica*, whose rediscovery is generally credited to the scholar Sannazaro in the year 1501.<sup>17</sup>

In order to shed more light on just how revolutionary Laetus's life may be deemed, let us compare briefly his life with two other Ovidian biographies composed roughly contemporaneously with him. In the mid to late Quattrocento, there are some six named biographers of Ovid, including, most prominently, Franciscus Puteolanus, Bonus Accursius, Paulus Marsus, Antonius Volscus, Bernardus Moretus, Raphael Regius, and several biographies which circulate anonymously in manuscript copies.<sup>18</sup> For the purposes of this article, let us examine more closely the two lives of Ovid of Bonus Accursius and Bernardus Moretus.

Bonus Accursius's life of Ovid, first printed in the 1475 edition of the *Metamorphoses* published at Milan by Ph. de Lavagnia (ISTC io00178000), may be considered one of the fullest, nay exhaustive treatments of Ovid's life and poetic career.<sup>19</sup> Accursius asserts in the introduction to his life that unlike some of his predecessors, who were more prone to invention than to the pursuit of truth, he will rely upon Ovid's own factual statements:

Qua quidem in re nihil equidem noui ex me ipso afferam, id quod facere nonnulli consueruerunt, ostentationis magis cupidi quam ueritatis. At ego ita de hoc poeta uerba facturus sum ut quicquid dixero, id ex eiusdem operibus a me collectum liquido appareat.

(In which matter, indeed I shall bring forth nothing new myself, which many, more desirous of show than truth, have done. Rather, whatever I say in my biography shall clearly be drawn by me from Ovid's own works.)

We learn of Ovid's birthplace (Sulmona), his birthdate, the existence of an older brother, of his early rhetorical training in Rome and subsequent civic duties, and of his rejection of politics for poetry.

Unlike Laetus who is much more objective, Accursius strikes a somewhat personal chord in his biography, mentioning Ovid's kindness, his character, his abstemiousness and horror of homosexuality. The reader is encouraged to empathize with the plight of the poet and to be personally moved by his great misfortunes, since Ovid, such a cultivated poet, was compelled to spend his last years among barbarians lacking any refinement.

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<sup>16</sup> See, in particular, Hexter 1986.

<sup>17</sup> See Reynolds 1983, 181.

<sup>18</sup> For a complete list of Renaissance biographers of Ovid, see Coulson 1997.

<sup>19</sup> The life is edited in Coulson 1997.

Accursius's biography concludes with a list of Ovid's known extant and lost works in the order written. The list of authentic Ovidian works includes: *Amores* (original version in five books), *Heroides*, *Amores* (revised version in three books), various youthful works, *Ars amatoria*, *Remedia amoris*, *Fasti*, the lost tragedy *Medea*, *Metamorphoses*, and the works composed in exile, *Tristia*, and the *Epistulae ex Ponto*. The *Epistula Sapphus* is deemed to be an authentic work of Ovid.

What is perhaps most striking about Accursius's biography, when compared to Laetus's, is its close structural adherence to *Tristia* 4.10, the semi-autobiographical poem written by Ovid from exile. Some brief excerpts from the opening of the life should serve to illustrate this affinity quite clearly:

Fuit igitur poeta noster claris parentibus ex ordine exquestri procreatus, eodem quarto sic scribente:

Si quid id, a proavis usque est vetus ordinis heres  
Non sum fortunae munere factus eques.

Et secundo Fastorum ad Octavianum:

Sancte pater patriae, tibi plebs, tibi curia nomen  
Hoc dedit, hoc dedimus nos tibi nomen, eques.

Quod etiam in Ponto ita confirmavit:

Si genus excutias, equites ab origine prima  
Usque per innumeros inueniemur auos.

(Our poet therefore was born from renowned parents of the equestrian order, as he himself writes in the same fourth book:

Heir, if that is of any value, to an ancient family,  
No new knight created just yesterday for his wealth.

And in the second book of the *Fasti* to Octavian:

Sacred father of the country, the plebs, the senate,  
We, the equestrian order, gave you this name.

Which he even thus confirms in the poems from Pontus:

If you check on my background, you will find  
An unbroken equestrian pedigree.)

Our second Ovidian biographer, Bernardus Moretus, composed the life in 1459 to serve as an introduction to his commentary on the *Ibis*. Moretus's life is the earliest of the lives of Ovid composed in Italy between 1450 and 1500. Moretus was a rhetorician at Bologna in the third quarter of the Quattrocento and seems to have been particularly interested in Ovid, for he com-

posed two prose lives, one versified life, and a full commentary on the *Ibis*.<sup>20</sup> The structure of his life is essentially the same as that of Accursius discussed above. Moretus organizes his life in two parts: the events of Ovid's life and a survey of his poetic corpus. As in Laetus's life, Ovid's birthdate is assigned to 43 BC when the consuls Hirtius and Pansa lost their lives at Mutina. In treating of the causes for exile, Moretus displays a note of skepticism when compelled to iterate the timeworn gossip of his predecessors: he concludes that the infamous *Ars amatoria* was the primary reason for banishment and frankly confesses that the traditional reasons advanced are pure guesswork, namely Ovid's unwitting viewing of Augustus engaged in sodomy.

Moretus draws a sympathetic portrayal of the poet, stressing his prodigious talents and congenial mores. Great care is taken to provide a list of genuine Ovidian works, while only those that can with certainty be ascribed to Ovid are admitted into the canon. Such spurious compositions as the *De cuculo*, *De pulice*, the *Nux*, the *De limace*, and the *De vetula* are passed over in silence. Nor does Moretus know of the *Halieutica*. The *Amores*, which was generally referenced in the Middle Ages by the title *De sine titulo*, regains its proper title.

While Laetus's life of Ovid is structured quite differently from the majority of lives circulating in Renaissance Italy and so marks a rather distinct and novel departure, it does not appear to have profoundly altered the approach of later commentators in composing the life of the poet. Aldus Manutius produced about 1502 a detailed life of Ovid along the same lines as those exploited by Bonus Accursius and Bernardus Moretus;<sup>21</sup> and Hercules Ciofanus, born in Ovid's own birthplace of Sulmona, again follows closely the structure of Ovid's autobiographical poem in the life which prefaces his complete edition of the works of Ovid published in 1581–1583. In my rather vast survey of the printed and manuscript sources for Ovidian biography down to 1600, I have found only one prose life of Ovid which in its approach is similar to Laetus's, that found in a manuscript now housed in the University library of Jena with the shelf mark Q.b.q.20.<sup>22</sup> Laetus's life of Ovid, however, does seem to have experienced a second life in the printed editions of Ovid published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for it makes a reappearance in the edition of Ovid published in London in 1821

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<sup>20</sup> Moretus's commentary is discussed in Frank T. Coulson, "Bernardo Moretti, A Newly Discovered Commentator on Ovid's *Ibis*" (forthcoming from the Warburg Institute). Moretus's verse life of Ovid will receive its editio princeps in this article, while the two prose lives of Ovid have been edited in Coulson 1987.

<sup>21</sup> Manutius 1502–1503, vol. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Edited in Coulson 1997.

(on p. 24) from the Burmann edition, originally published in Amsterdam in 1727. In the eighteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Ovidian biography reached its zenith with the biographies of Jean Masson in Latin and Henri de La Ville de Mirmont in French, Laetus's life was still being read and consulted.

In conclusion, Laetus's work on Ovid's calendar poem the *Fasti*, first undertaken in the last years of the 1460s and continued to around 1490, seems to be relatively neglected in the scholarly literature. His life of Ovid, which circulated in various late fifteenth-century manuscripts both as an introduction to his commentary on the *Fasti* and as a life detached from the commentary proper, marks a distinct and noteworthy evolution in Ovidian biography in the humanistic period, since it moves away from the traditional format and structure, which had relied upon Ovid's own autobiographical poem *Tristia* 4.10, to present a more objective, clinical analysis founded on such secondary sources as Seneca the Elder. The commentary on the *Fasti*, which exists in at least four identified manuscripts, certainly deserves a fuller study and edition.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> A desideratum now being filled by Michael Jean of the Department of Classics of the Ohio State University.

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