CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL REALITY
AND POETIC REPRESENTATION

“Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. . . . The exile’s new world, logically enough, is unnatural and its unreality resembles fiction.”

quia res est publica Caesar

“Since Caesar is the state.”

Tr. 4.4.15

When he was banished sometime in the fall of the year 8 AD, Ovid was at the height of his fame, having completed the sixth book of his Fasti and nearing the end of the Metamorphoses. At this time the Augustan principate was besieged by turmoil from within and outside: murder plots, natural and military disasters, and personal and political losses between 4–9 AD had brought the emperor to the brink of suicide. To read Sir Ronald Syme, the last decade of Augustus’ rule (4–14 AD) was shrouded in “an atmosphere of gloom and repression.” Gloom may well apply to any era, especially in the eyes of an avowed Tacitist such as Syme, but repression points to a fundamental difference in the historical circumstances under which the Augustan poets lived. The crisis of 23/22 BC brought about by the conspiracy of Caepio and Murena was indeed dire, but it could never have occurred to the princeps then to ban a book of Horace or banish Vergil. This is not

1 Said 2000, 181.
3 Syme 1978, 205.
4 See Raaflaub and Samons 1990, 425–426, for a summary with bibliography.
necessarily because of what they wrote, but rather because of when they were writing. The Roman poets of the generation before Ovid knew to savor peace after a spate of protracted civil wars to which they and the Roman world had grown accustomed. Unlike Ovid, they were never subjected to the “repression” of Augustus’ later, increasingly autocratic years. As a member of the landed aristocracy (domi nobilis) from an important municipium (Sulmo), Ovid had only to enjoy the fruits of the peace that came with the consolidation of power into the hands of a single ruler at Rome. In contrast to his Augustan predecessors he never faced the dilemma between “liberty or stable government,” as Syme famously phrased it in the preface to his Roman Revolution. Yet history made Ovid both a beneficiary of a new phase in Roman government that had enabled his literary success and a notorious casualty of the despotic prerogative of an aging princeps. When Ovid was about fifty years of age and the most popular poet in Rome, the emperor Augustus banished him to the city of Tomis on the western coast of the Black Sea.

Tomis, modern Constanța, Romania, had been a prosperous trading colony of the Ionian city of Miletus from as early as the sixth century BC and was in the Augustan period the principal port of the western portion of the Black Sea region. Ovid himself notes that Tomis marked the most newly acquired point of Augustan imperial expansion while he was in exile, Tr. 2.199–200:

5 As Johnson 2008, 4, has already observed of Horace and Ovid; cf. Little 1982, 346.
7 Syme 1939, vii.
8 Knox 2001 wants to see Tiberius behind Ovid’s exile, which allows him to compare the notorious case of Clutorius Priscus, perhaps the very Priscus mentioned by Ovid in Pont. 4.16.10. Priscus had been rewarded by Tiberius for his poem on the occasion of Germanicus’ death in 19 and in the interest of further gain composed another poem prematurely commemorating the death of the emperor’s own son, Drusus, when he fell ill. He foolishly recited the poem in the company of some Roman matrons and was subsequently denounced and convicted of maiestas by the senate in 21. Despite the intervention of a few supporters and the absence of Tiberius from Rome during the incident, Priscus was murdered in prison quickly after the trial (Tac. Ann. 3.49–51; Dio 57.20.3–4; PIR², C 1196). Knox suggests that it may have been Ovid’s panegyrical digression at Ars 1.177–228 on the military exploits of the young Gaius Caesar, whom Augustus would have preferred as his successor, that rubbed Tiberius the wrong way, stating, 181: “Con Tiberio . . . non ci voleva molto.”