Although Ovid left a more copious body of work than any other Augustan poet, no manuscript carries an ancient biographical sketch of the sort transmitted with the poems of Virgil, Horace, and Tibullus. Almost everything we think about his life depends on first-person utterances in his poems. The difficulties of weighing this sort of testimony are by now familiar. No formula has yet been found that graphs the relationship between the imaginative “I” who speaks in poems and the life experience of poets who write them. Even when a poem seems to gesture most transparently toward external realities, it is prudent to suspect that it discloses not so much facts as factoids. The details may not fit the Ovid of history but an imaginary alter ego projected by a self-aggrandizing, evasive, and inconsistent informant.

On the other hand, relatively little in poets’ testimony or in other lore about their lives is ever decisively discredited. Since details can rarely be checked against an independent record, the criterion of truth comes down to one of fit. A given detail either fits or does not fit an understanding built up from other details. But a changed understanding always has the potential to vindicate details hitherto dismissed. Furthermore, while the persona strain of criticism has taught us to interpret the rhetorical slant of first-person utterances more acutely, it has not seriously shaken belief in the grosser information that poets impart about their lives. Persona criticism that is true to its creed makes no claim about the external world, after all. And so with rare exceptions, even critical readers still believe that Horace’s father was a freedman, that Virgil worked on the Georgics in Naples, and that Ovid was sent into exile by Augustus.

*I wish to thank Robert Kaster and Barbara Weiden Boyd for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter.*
In any case, for Ovid’s life we have little choice but to make the best of the testimony we have, with the caveat that the name “Ovid” in what follows refers for the most part to a figment of his poems.

1. Early Ovid (43 to 13 B.C.)

According to Tr. 4.10.3–14, Ovid was born in Sulmo about ninety miles east of Rome on March 20, 43 B.C. In this poem and others (Am. 3.8.9–10, 3.15.5–6, Pont. 4.8.17–18), much stress is laid upon the pedigree of his family: Ovid says that they had belonged to the equestrian order for generations, unlike the knights created during the recent civil wars.¹ At the same time, there is no hint in all of his work that his family had suffered in the civil wars. He is the only Augustan poet whose background does not feature an episode of handicap or deprivation resulting from the period.

How the Ovidii of Sulmo negotiated the twisting course of the struggle is not recorded, but as leading citizens (see CIL 9.3082), they are likely to have played a part in the town’s decision to declare for Julius Caesar at the very beginning (Caes. BC 1.18.1–2). At the end of it, the young Ovid shared in the favor that lifted up many families of municipal Italy during Augustus’s reign. His affinity with other municipal elites comes into view at later points in his life. One of his three marriages (Tr. 4.10.69–74) was to a woman from Falerii (Am. 3.13.1–2), and Ovid later allied himself with a family from Fundi (Pont. 2.11).² That wife brought Roman connections which were even more important. She was a protégée of Augustus’s aunt Atia and cousin Marcia, and she frequented the house of Paullus Fabius Maximus, the blue-blood whom Marcia married.³

Ovid’s daughter was eventually to complete the family’s ascent to senatorial status by marrying a Roman senator (Tr. 1.3.19 and Sen. Dial. 2.17.1); a step-daughter was also married to a senator (Pont. 4.8.11–12). But Ovid had had the opportunity to achieve senatorial

¹ As Millar (1993) 6 notes, this claim cannot be strictly true, since Sulmo did not share in the Roman citizenship until the first century B.C.
² About the origin of one of his three wives nothing is known. Ovid’s municipal connections also included a long-time hospes at Carsoli (F. 4.687).
³ For Ovid’s wife’s connections with Marcia and Maximus, see White (1993), Appendix 2B, nos. 18 and 32.