

The Unreality of Mrs. Naso  
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One consequence of Ovid's exile is the introduction of a new character in his poems- his wife. This paper examines how Ovid presents his wife and develops her character over the course of his epistles. I will argue that Ovid's wife ought to be read as a poetic construct designed more to evoke sympathy in his audience than to be a reflection of reality.

To those familiar with Ovid's prior poetry and for a poet so famous for his amatory elegy, the initial appearance of Ovid's wife in *Tristia* I.3 is another signal of a departure from Ovid's prior poetic identity. The poem describes Ovid's final night in Rome before his exile and depicts his wife as a selflessly devoted spouse, devastated at the fate of her husband. Ovid's language presents her as a woman in mourning and alludes to Virgil's Hecuba. In the poems that follow Ovid's wife repeatedly reappears, presented as the ideal, faithful Roman matron, who takes on the role of intercessor to Livia and is the constant supporter in Rome for Ovid's recall. But in *Epistulae ex Ponto* III.1 Ovid shatters this image before our eyes, as he deconstructs his own wife's literary persona by admitting it is his own literary creation and threatens that her "real" persona ought to live up to the literary persona he has created (*Pont.* III.1.43-48). This paper will trace Ovid's presentation of his wife and consider what drove Ovid to make such a statement, leading him to abandon one of his most successful avenues for eliciting sympathy among his audience. Such a statement also causes the reader to reevaluate Ovid's prior characterization of his wife and her role in his poems.

We know nothing more about Ovid's wife than what he tells us in his poems. In *Tristia* IV.10 Ovid reports that he had been married twice previously, but this, his third wife, has been his constant support during the period of exile. Our only clue to her historical identity is Ovid's claim that his wife is related to the Fabii (*Pont.* I.2.136). Martin Helzle (1989) is one of the few scholars to have written about Ovid's wife and concludes in his study that her absence in Ovid's latest epistles as an indication she traveled to join him in Tomis. I will argue that she remained in Rome and her absence in Ovid's later poems stems from behavior inconsistent with the character Ovid wished to depict in his poems. The paper will close by considering the implications which extend from the fact that Ovid's characterization of his wife is fictionalized and how we might read such malleability into other historical figures that appear in Ovid's exile poetry.

Helzle, M. (1989) "Mr. and Mrs. Ovid," *Greece and Rome* 36: 183-193.