

Ovid, Volcanoes, and the Potential Violence of Erotic Desire

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Abstract

Although the 'fires of love' were a common motif, volcanic fires were a much more unusual metaphor for erotic desire. The imagery appears most often in Ovid's works, prior to whom there are only two extant examples. Theocritus depicts the feckless Delphians persuading Simaetha that the intensity of his love matches hers by claiming that 'often Eros kindles a flame that blazes more than Hephaistos on Lipari' (*Ἐρως δέ ἄρα καὶ Αὐταράιν / πολλάκι Ἀφάστοτο σέλας φλογερώτερον αἴθει*: *Id.* 2.133–4). Catullus compares the double-edged *cura* given to him by Amathusian Venus to the fires of Mount Etna, telling his addressee 'you know in what manner she scorched me when I burned as much as the Trinacrian crag' (*in quo me torquerit genere, / cum tantum arderem quantum Trinacia rupes...*, 68b.52–3).

Ovid employs this uncommon image of erupting desire in the *Ars Amatoria*, *Remedia Amoris*, *Heroides*, and *Metamorphoses*. As in Theocritus and Catullus, it is a male who burns with 'Etna's fires' (*Rem.* 491–2; *Met.* 13.867–9, 876–7) or controls its force (*Ars* 3.489–90). *Heroides* 15.9–12 is an exception but, issues of authorship aside, it is possible that the author found the volcanic metaphor suitable for Sappho – the female poet was often regarded as a transgressor of gender and sexual boundaries.

In this paper I explore Graeco-Roman cultural ideas about volcanoes as geographical spaces of rich mythological meaning as well as real impact upon the environment and people. I give examples of their association with the emotion of anger and madness and argue that this image of nature at its most wild and terrifying appealed to Ovid because of its suggestion of latent violence. It will be shown that the volcanic fires of desire reflect the broader Ovidian worldview – desire always has the potential to tip into violence.

1. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 5.352–8

sub qua resupinus harenas
ejectaflammamque ferox vomit ore Typhoeus.
saepe remoliri luctatur pondera terrae
oppidaque et magnos devolvere corpore montes: 355
inde tremit tellus, et rex pax ipse silentum,
ne pateat latoque solum retegatur hiatus
immissusque dies trepidantes terreat umbras.

'On his back under this mountain, fierce Typhoeus throws up sand and vomits flame from his mouth. Often, he struggles to push away the weight of the earth and to roll the towns and huge mountains with his body: then the ground trembles, and the king of the silent ones fears lest the land be thrown open with a wide gash and daylight, let in, scares the fluttering shades.'

- Calliope takes up the Pierid's story (318–31), maintaining focus on Typhoeus (cf. *Pi. P.* 1.15–28; and *Virg. Aen.* 3.578–82 where monster conflated with Enceladus), and introduces Sicily as the scene of Proserpina's abduction by Pluto.
- Etna's volcanic landscape site of desire and violence even before the narrative shifts to the actual site of the abduction, a *locus amoenus* in the form of Lake Pergus near Henna (5.835–92).
- Etna as *locus horridus* prefigures the narrative's eventual sexual violence and creates an atmosphere of fear.

2. Ovid *Metamorphoses* 13.862–9

ille tamen placeatque sibi placeatque licebit.
quod nolle, Galatea, tibi; modo copia detur:
sentit esse mihi tanto pro corpore vires!
viscera viva traham divulsaque membra per agros 865
perque tuas spargam (sic se tibi misceat!) undas.
uror enim, laesusque exaequat acris ignis, (cf. *Catull.* 72.5–8!)
cumque suis videat translata viribus Aetnen
pectore ferre meo, nec tu, Galatea, moveris.'

'Nevertheless let that man please himself and, it will be permitted – though I don't want it – that he please you too, Galatea; just let the opportunity be given that he may see that I have strength in proportion to so great a body! I will drag his living innards and torn apart limbs through the field and I will strew them through your waves (in this way let him mate with you!). For I am burning and, wounded, the fire boils up more fiercely, and I seem to carry in my breast Mount Etna, transferred with its violence, and you, Galatea, are not concerned.'

- Narrative set near Mount Etna but Ovid does not describe the volcano at length, allowing the story to unfold in a hazier landscape of pastures, caves, cliffs, waves, and mountains.
- The volcano instead a kind of natural force in sympathy with Polyphemus. The intensity of his emotion is metaphorically compared to the volcano.
- Not erotic desire unalloyed but desire and anger mixed.



3. Ovid *Ars amatoria* 3.487–90

perfidus ille quidem, qui talia pignora servat, 489
sed tamen Aetnae fulminis instar habent. 490
vidi ego pallentes isto terrore puellas 487
servitum miseris tempus in omne pati. 488

He is untrustworthy indeed, who keeps such pledges, but nevertheless they have the likeness of Etna's thunderbolt. I have seen girls pale with terror of that wretchedly suffering slavery forever.

- Etna as source of Jupiter's thunderbolts – produced by the Cyclops in their forge (*Aetna* 36–40; *Cic. Div.* 2.44; cf. *Prop.* 3.17.21) or to comprise the remnants of the thunderbolts thrown by the king of the gods in his battle with Typhoeus (Apollo. 1.6.3; cf. *Ov. Fast.* 1.573–4).
- Common belief, derided by Cicero at *Div.* 2.44, that Jupiter used his thunderbolts to punish the wicked (e.g. *Virg. Aen.* 6.585–94).
- Etna adds quasi-religious *gravitas* to woman's fear of discovery. Threat of divine punishment.

4. Ovid *Ars amatoria* 1.255–62

quid referam Baiae praetextaque litora velis
et quae de calido sulphure fumat aqua?
hinc aliquis vulnus referens in pectore dixit
'non haec, ut fama est, unda salubris erat.'
ecce, suburbanae templum nemorale Dianae
partaque per gladios regna nocente manu, 260
illa, quod est virgo, quod tela Cupidinis odit,
multa dedit populo vulnera, multa dabit.



Why should I recount Baiae and its shores bordered with sails, and the water that smokes with hot sulphur? Bringing back from this place a wound in his breast someone said, 'That water was not, as rumour had it, healthy.' What about the woodland temple of suburban Diana and the kingdoms gained through swords by guilty hand? As she is a virgin, as she hates the weapons of Cupid, she has given and will give our people many wounds.

- Thermal-mineral springs on the Bay of Naples were thought connected to area's volcanoes (Strabo 5.6; *Vitrivius* 2.6).
- Intertextual engagement with Grattius' *Cynegetica*, a poem about 'happy arts for hunters' (*laetas venantibus artis*, 1; cf. *Ov. Ars am.* 1.253; see *Sala* unpublished; *Tsaknaki* 2018). Grattius' hot springs are stagnant pools of oil beneath volcanic Etna (430–4; esp. 432, 'streams burst from its scorched jaws': *ruptaque ambustis faucibus annes*).
- Imagery at *Ars am.* 1.255–8 paints the 'fires of love' in the background but through the passage's metaphors of disease, mental ill-health and wounding it light-heartedly renders this volcanic landscape dangerous.

5. Ovid *Remedia amoris* 489–98

quod siquid praecipta valent mea, siquid Apollo
utile mortales perdocte ore meo, 490
quamvis infelix media torreberis Aetna,
frigidior glacie fac videare tuae.
et sanum simula nec, si quid forte dolebis,
sentiat, et ride, cum tibi flendus eris.
non ego te iubeo medias abrumpere curas: 495
non sunt imperii tam fera iussa mei.
quod non es, simula positosque imitare furores:
sic facies vere, quod meditatus eris.

But if my teachings are worth anything, or if Apollo teaches mortals anything useful by my mouth, however much you are roasting in Etna's middle, unhappy one, make it so that you seem colder than ice to your girl: pretend to be sane and, if you really are upset, don't let her see it, and smile, though you would weep for yourself. I'm not ordering you to break off your feelings mid-stream: such harsh commands are not part of my rule. Pretend to be what you're not and act like your madness has been put aside: in this way you will actually do what you have thought about.

- Imagery of mental ill-health (*sanum*, 493; cf. *qui poterit sanum fingere, sanus erit*, 504) depicts dangers of love.
- Ovid adds menace of volcanic landscape: volcanic fires an external force surrounding the lover – as though he were an Empedocles who had jumped into the jaws of Etna – but the mountain does double time as a metaphor for broiling emotions within (cf. *Met.* 13.868). The lover must keep emotions caged within a cool exterior > cf. monstrous Typhoeus trapped beneath Etna.
- Contrast between inner fires and icy exterior mimics real landscape. Snows there still + Cf. 'snowy Etna, nurse of dazzling snow all the year' (*νιφέσσα* Άιτνα, πάντες χιόνις οὔειας τιθῆνα, *Pi. P.* 1.20)

6. [Ovid] *Heroides* 15.9–12

uror, ut indomitis ignem exercentibus Euris
fertilis accensis messibus ardet ager.
arva, Phao, celebras diversa Typhoidos Aetnae;
me calor Aetnae non minor igne tenet.

I burn, as the fertile field blazes when its crops are set alight and untamed southeast winds drive the fire. You frequent the far off fields of Typhon's Etna, Phao: heat holds me, one no less than Etna's fire.

- Sappho firstly compares her desire to part of nature distinctly coded as feminine in the literary tradition, a fertile field. Phao is explicitly associated with Typhoeus and Etna.
- However, her desire is as intense as Etna's fires.
- Sappho of *Heroides* 15 has been seen as 'mannish' (Gordon 1997; Hallett 2005) and the way that she associates volcanic fire with female desire may support this.
- Volcanic metaphor also introduces potential violence. Sappho of *Heroides* 15 maddened by experience of rejection and, following Menander's *Leukadia* (F 258 Koerte), her destructive desire will lead her to throw herself from the cliffs (*Her.* 15.171–92).

Conclusion

The 'fires of love' were a common motif, but volcanic fires were a more unusual metaphor for erotic desire. Though attested only twice prior to Ovid, it is a metaphor that he returns to several times in erotic works as well as in the *Metamorphoses*. This project has demonstrated that Ovid employs this metaphor in contexts where there is some danger – to sexual modesty, to reputation, to mental health, or even to life itself. Mount Etna and other volcanic phenomena had a variety of mythological associations, but Ovid mostly draws upon their connection with Typhoeus most often, creating a sense of latent violence. Whether his tone is more light-hearted, as in the *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*, or more serious as in the *Heroides*, the image of the volcano allows Ovid to paint the emotion of erotic desire as a powerful natural force that can have devastating effect. Ovid's depiction of the volcanic landscape is most detailed in the *Metamorphoses*, the latest of the works under investigation, and it is here that he brings the *locus horridus* to fruition. Whether as the setting for Proserpina's rape or as a metaphor for the desire and anger boiling in Polyphemus, the volcanic environment and its wild forces suit the poem's constant depictions of desire leading to violence.

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