

Ovid's Hostile Environment Beyond the Pathetic Fallacy

Abstract

Ovid's depictions of nature are often interpreted in terms of the pathetic fallacy, especially in his epistolographic works. According to such interpretations, the rugged, impassable terrain of Dia in *Heroides* 10 reflects the aporia of the poem's narrator, Ariadne; the desolate wastes of Tomis, as described, for example, in *Tristia* 5.2 and 5.10, reflect the depression and lack of poetic inspiration Ovid claims to endure during his exile. Without denying that such analyses of Ovid's descriptions of nature are correct on a certain level, the question remains: why are the poet's responses to the natural world so consistently negative?

Building on the two case-studies given above, and adducing a third instance – the account of Thebes in *Metamorphoses* 3 – I will investigate the sources of Ovid's fear and hostility towards nature. In the case of Ariadne's Dia, the crucial function of the natural world is to inhibit her mobility and prevent Theseus from seeing her. In the examples from the *Tristia*, the desolation of the land stifles Ovid's poetic creativity. Turning to the *Metamorphoses*, Thebes is both founded in a *locus horridus* and is, throughout its early history, subject to the hostility of the natural world around it. The normal formation of the city is precluded by environmental forces, culminating in the destruction of the ruling family.

I conclude that Ovid's hostility to nature arises from his belief in the virtue of *urbanitas*. Throughout his oeuvre he firmly situates romantic love, socio-political bonds between individuals, and literary production in an urban context. Across my case-studies, nature prevents these facets of *urbanitas* from manifesting. Ovid's hostility is not incoherent, but follows a consistent logic throughout his career.



Case-Studies

Heroides 10 ("Ariadne to Theseus")

Metamorphoses 3

Tristia 3.10 and 5.10

(Control-cases: Ovid, *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*; Catullus, *Carmina* 63 and 64; Tibullus 1)

Method

- Identify common elements of Ovidian *loci horridi* and conceits about the hostility of nature more generally.
- Consider traditional interpretations, especially the idea of the natural world's depiction as reflective of human experiences ('the pathetic fallacy')
- Reverse the polarity and assign agency to the natural world – what about the natural world causes the perceptions of it as hostile / negatively impacts human experiences within it.
- Identify the logic which connects disparate representations of nature in the Ovidian corpus.

Images

Charles Le Brun (c. 1664), *Theseus Abandons Ariadne at Naxos*
Cornelis van Haarlem (1588), *Two Followers of Cadmus devoured by a Dragon*
Eugène Delacroix (1859), *Ovid among the Scythians*
Nicholas Poussin (c.1634), *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*

Control Cases

Ovid, *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*

Erotic love and literary production intertwined as products of an urban milieu. Contrast to *Heroides* (where love is precluded by natural forces) and *Tristia* (where literary production is impeded by different circumstances for the poet).

Catullus 64

Some hostility to nature but explicable in terms of human actions. Critical of establishment of a nature-humanity divide – logic of the poem is not a straightforward binary distinction.

Tibullus 1

Establishes a similar sort of divide to Ovid but rejects urban life in favour of rusticity. Not quite the same sort of natural environment; another case of finding a middle ground between urban and wild.

Ovid, *Heroides* 10.21-26

Interea tota clamavi in litore 'Theseu!':
Reddebat nomen concava saxa tuum,
Et quotiens ego te, totiens locus ipse vocabat.
Ipse locus miserae ferre volebat opem.
Mons fuit — apparent frutices in vertice rari;
Hinc scopulus raucis pendet adesus aquis.

Meanwhile upon the shore I shouted "Theseus!"
The hollow rocks returned your name to me.
And as often as I called you so too did the place itself.
The very place wanted to bring help to wretched me.
There was a mountain — scattered shrubs appeared on its top.
From here hung a crag, eaten away by rough waters.



Ovid, *Heroides* 10.135-8

Nunc quoque non oculis, sed, qua potes, adspice mente
Haerentem scopulo, quem vaga pulsat aqua.
Adspice demissos lugentis more capillos
Et tunicas lacrimis sicut ab imbre gravis.

Now too look – not with your eyes, but with your mind –
On me clinging to this crag, which the wild water strikes.
Look on my hair let loose like a mourner's
And my clothes, damp with tears as if from rain.

Key Points

- Natural world at first portrayed as sympathetic but acts as the key obstacle between Ariadne and Theseus.
- Ariadne is the lens through which the natural world is presented. Initially presented as misinterpreting the role of nature.
- For Ovid, natural obstacles at the root of all the relationship failures in the *Heroides*.



Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.28-34

Silva vetus stabat, nulla violata securi,
et specus in medio, virgis ac vimine densus,
efficiens humilem lapidum compagibus arcum,
uberibus fecundus aquis, ubi conditus antro
Martius anguis erat, cristis praesignis et auro;
igne micant oculi, corpus tumet omne venenis,
tres vibrant linguae, triplici stant ordine dentes.

There stood an ancient wood, untouched by the axe.
And a cave in its middle, dense with twigs and switches,
Forming a low arch from the joints of stones,
Fertile with rich waters, where hidden in the cavern
Was a serpent of Mars, distinguished with plumes and gold.
Its eyes shone with fire, all its body swelled with poison.
Its three tongues flickered, its teeth stood three-deep.

Key Points

- Thebes founded on a sort of 'original sin', namely, violation of a sacrosanct space.
- Failings of Thebes as 'political experiment' can be traced back to this point, culminating in Cadmus' transformation into a serpent.
- Natural forces constantly oppose the political development of the city, and destroy the ruling family slowly, piece by piece.

Conclusions

- Ovid demonstrates a consistent logic throughout his depictions of nature. This is verified by a comparison to his descriptions of the city of Rome.
- Nature is set in a diametric opposition to the city of Rome. This logic of *urbanitas* establishes the city as the necessary precondition of romantic love, a functioning state, and the production of literature itself.
- This does not deny the great variety of Ovidian landscapes across his corpus. Different natural environments across his oeuvre are hostile for varying reasons.
- In some respects this familiar 'nature-culture' binary is less prominent in the works of contemporaries and predecessors including Catullus and Tibullus.

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Ovid, *Tristia* 3.10.73-6

poma negat regio, nec haberet Acontius in quo
scriberet hic dominae verba legenda suea.
aspiceres nudos sine fronde, sine arbore, campos .
heu loca felici non adeunda viro!

The region lacks fruit, nor would Acontius have anything
On which he would write words to be read by his mistress.
You might gaze on bare fields, without leaves, without trees,
Oh realms not to be approached by a happy man!

Ovid, *Tristia* 5.10.1-4

Ut sumus in Ponto, ter frigore constitit Hister,
facta est Euxini dura ter unda maris.
at mihi iam videor patria procul esse tot annis,
Dardana quot Graio Troia sub hoste fuit.

As I've been in Pontus, thrice the Danube has frozen with cold
Thrice have the waves of the Black Sea become hard.
But not I seem to have been far from my home for as many years
As many as Dardanian Troy was besieged by the Greek foe.

Key Points

- The harshness of the climate in Tomis impedes literary production throughout the exilic literature.
- Ovid consistently falls back on the same tropes under the pressure of his surroundings, enacting the disastrous effect of the environment on his surroundings.
- This failure of literary production can be traced back to hints in the *Heroides*, and likewise nature's hostility towards relationships (both romantic and platonic) which is foregrounded there haunts the exilic literature.