

Ovid Subdues the Tiber: Literary Approaches to Managing Environmental Anxiety

In the face of environmental risk, people consistently employ strategies to preserve their own peace of mind -- from ignoring the threat, to deliberately recasting it as a prospect for positive change. People asked to do something about climate change shrug sheepishly, or joke about new beach holidays in Canada (see e.g. Brügger, Dessai et al., 2015). But this is not only a problem of modern political willpower in the face of scientific evidence. These approaches to environmental risk management go back millennia, to the literature that first started to shape Western narratives of nature.

This paper considers the way that the Tiber and its associated environmental risks are handled in Ovid's poetry. I argue that Ovid's Tiber is a demonstration in the management of imaginative risk. Ovid's poetic oeuvre centers upon two distinctive versions of the city of Rome, which each present a different strategy for coping with the environmental risk posed by its famous river. I consider Ovid's strategies in describing and personifying the Tiber's behavior, and the reasons that he employs them at different moments.

I start with an examination of the management of riverine risk in Ovid's love poems. The Tiber only makes two, very brief, appearances in the amatory poetry, and is never mentioned in the urban tours conducted in the *Ars Amatoria*. However, the many other rivers to feature in these works highlight two major riverine anxieties: that rivers might dry up or cease to flow to the sea (as e.g. the Simois at *Am.* 1.15.9-10), or that rivers might flood and impede human life (as e.g. the entire conceit of *Am.* 3.6). These concerns are kept firmly shut out of the amatory city, where the sources of water are ever-flowing, carefully channelled and controlled by the Augustan hydraulic program (as e.g. the new Aqua Virgo aqueduct, *A.A.* 3.385-6). Readers are made aware of the environmental problems associated with rivers in the Mediterranean, but by ignoring the threats posed by the Tiber, the amatory poetry succeeds in making them disappear.

Next, I consider the version of Rome presented in the *Fasti*. In striking contrast to the amatory city, here the Tiber is out in full force. In dialogue with Horace's reinterpretation of the Tiber's flood as a good omen for Augustus' name change (Horace *C.* 1.2; cf. Clark 2010), the *Fasti* does not deny the flood-prone reality of the city's river, but instead connects the Tiber floods with moments of historical significance. Instead of being dangerous for urban development, these floods are shown to have helped further it - right from the moment when Romulus and Remus faced death by drowning (*Fast.* 2.389-92). Time and again, the Tiber floods are shown to be good omens for the city and its inhabitants, and a regular, predictable, beneficial component of their ritual calendar. Instead of ignoring riverine risk, the *Fasti* seeks to understand and rationalize it.

The dominant trend among environmental scholars is to interpret the different strategies for preserving peace of mind as indicators of psychological difference. People with different kinds of minds will cope with the distress of nature's malevolence in different ways. Ovid's differing treatments of the Tiber suggest another approach, though. The amatory works and the *Fasti* offer up two different genres to tell tales of the city. Different styles of storytelling call for different styles of risk management. Perhaps we need to take more seriously not just the profiles of risk managers, but the genres in which they manage it.

Bibliography

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Nature Climate Change 5: 1031-1037

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