

Sophisticating a Cyclops: Depictions of Polyphemus in Roman Wall-Painting at Pompeii

The topic of Roman wall-painting at Pompeii is far from neglected in scholarship, but only two scholars have studied depictions of Polyphemus and Galatea from this corpus (Holland 1884, Thomas 1970). Vasiliki Kostopoulou more recently addressed the pair, but focuses on their appearance in literature (Kostopoulou 2007). The images of Polyphemus in wall-painting at Pompeii hardly depict the man-eating Cyclops from Homer's *Odyssey*. Instead, he appears as a shepherd and is often with Galatea, in accordance with his depictions in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Theocritus' *Idylls*. These two sources describe his failed advances towards the nymph, but imply that his courting softened his violent demeanor. This literary tradition is best represented by the famous painting from the villa at Boscotrecase, where Odysseus' ships in the background allude to the futility of Polyphemus' infatuation (von Blanckenhagen and Alexander 1990, 28-33). However, some wall-paintings in Roman houses show Polyphemus as successful in his wooing of Galatea. Eleanor Winsor Leach argues that the different responses of Galatea seen in paintings can be attributed to the Roman notion concerning the power of art to bring about change (Leach 1992, 74). This paper proposes a different societal focus, arguing that it is not Polyphemus' song that changes Galatea's mind, but rather his new-found cultivation in the context of Roman domestic space that enables his success. One possible reason for this new twist is an association with the Roman status symbols of education and success. The popularity of this type of depiction represents on the local level a perceived correlation between pursuit of the arts and achievement, and a wider concept of cultivated Roman identity following the Augustan period.

Roman paintings tend to favor the Polyphemus the love sick shepherd of Theocritus and Ovid instead of Homer's vicious monster. However, the paintings deviate from these literary

traditions by showing Polyphemus as successful in his pursuit of Galatea. Neither literary sources ever mention Galatea returning his affections, let alone writing love letters to the Cyclops. Such an event is a recurring scene from this corpus. A few paintings show Polyphemus receiving a letter, most likely sent by Galatea, from Cupid riding on a dolphin. Such depictions are found in domestic contexts, as well as in shops. Some are also near depictions of Venus fishing with Cupids, which furthers the scheme of Polyphemus in love. An additional painting from Herculaneum mirrors the ones from Pompeii, except Polyphemus has a lyre to promote his sophistication even more.

This paper argues that Polyphemus' new-found success in wooing Galatea suggests that pursuit of the arts has the power to civilize even a monstrous Cyclops. Polyphemus has not only abandoned his violent nature for singing and pining after Galatea, but he has also become literate in his exchange of love letters on tabulae. The popularity with this type of Polyphemus may stem from the increased cultural movement at Rome during this time. The early 1st c. CE in the Roman empire saw an influx of wealth among non-elites and an increased interest in creating Roman cultural works on par with the Greeks. The new Polyphemus could represent the cultural aspirations of Roman society as a whole—even a hideous Cyclops can be transformed into a poet and a lover. As Andrew Wallace-Hadrill observes, the Romans acknowledged that they were uncivilized once, but they gained superior behavior derived from reliance on laws and knowledge of classical literature, which distanced them from savagery (Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 32-35). This kind of transformation is analogous to that of Polyphemus, as the cannibalistic Cyclops becomes tempered when he learns to sing and write letters to his lady love. In conclusion, the images of this successful lover Polyphemus can best be understood as illustrating the prosperity that accompanies those who aspire to become educated in the arts. Not only is

Polyphemus able to court Galatea, but his new pursuits have caused him to transform and grant him the ability to gain what he has sought after in earlier literature.

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