
Aetna edited and translated by Robinson Ellis with new introduction and bibliography by Katharina Volk

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The Latin poem *Aetna* has a unique place in the surviving Greco-Roman literature on volcanoes. The classical world was acquainted with the various forms of volcanic activity that occur in the Mediterranean region and there are references to volcanoes and volcanic activity scattered across a wide range of Greek and Latin literature—in poetry, history, letter-writing, treatises on geography and meteorology, and in other genres as well. But none of these works is specifically about volcanic phenomena, with the sole exception of the *Aetna*, a didactic poem of nearly 650 lines which seeks to give a rational explanation of the eruptions of Mount Etna. The work is attributed to Vergil in the ancient Vergilian lives and in most of the manuscript tradition, but this attribution is generally rejected today. Date and authorship are still debated but it is agreed that the poem predates the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79, which is not referred to in the poem. Many scholars would date the poem to the decade or two before AD 79 but one should perhaps not rule out a date as early as the reign of Tiberius or even late in the reign of Augustus.

Study of the *Aetna* is bedeviled by the fact that the medieval manuscripts preserve the text in an exceedingly corrupt state. This is good news for textual critics, who have often been attracted to the poem's challenges; but it means that study of its scientific ideas is difficult: the main outlines of the argument are mostly clear enough but much of the detail is obscure and its interpretation controversial. The difficulties are compounded by the fact that it is a poem working within the ancient didactic tradition: not only are there long sections on standard themes of didactic poetry that have nothing directly to do with volcanoes, but also the scientific sections themselves are often written in poetic language and poetic imagery.

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Robinson Ellis' edition of *Aetna* was originally published by the Clarendon Press (Oxford) over a century ago in 1901. Nowadays, it is increasingly easy to get hold of works of scholarship that have long been out of print and out of copyright. They are being made available in electronic form by Google Books and others,¹ and in printed form, for example, in Nabu Public Domain Reprints or in Cambridge University Press' new Cambridge Library Collection series. The volume here under review comes from the Bristol Phoenix Press' Classic Editions series, which has the merit of including in each volume a new introduction which sets the reprinted work in its original scholarly context, assesses its continuing importance, and gives a selective modern bibliography.²

The introduction to this volume is ably provided by Katharina Volk, who is well known for her writings on Latin didactic poetry, including the *Aetna*.³ She gives an entertaining sketch of the career of Ellis, who was well known for his eccentric appearance and eccentric manners, and was Corpus Professor of Latin at Oxford from 1893 till his death in 1913. During his lifetime, he was regarded by some as the leading classical scholar of his day. He was particularly interested in manuscripts and textual criticism, and was drawn towards obscure texts that were outside the canon, so that the *Aetna* attracted his scholarly attention over many years.

Ellis' edition was published in 1901, partly in reaction to the publication of the textually conservative German edition of Siegfried Sudhaus in 1898. The longest section of Ellis' introduction deals with the manuscripts; and there are also sections on date and authorship, and on the possibility that the Aristotelian *De mundo* was a source. He then gives an analysis of the poem's content, a text with *apparatus criticus* and facing English translation, a detailed commentary, predominantly concerned with problems of text and interpretation, and an *index verborum*.

As Volk says, history has not viewed Ellis' achievements as generously as some of his contemporaries did. In the case of the *Aetna*,

¹ Ellis' *Aetna* is available electronically at <http://www.archive.org/details/aetnaacriticalr00elligoog>.

² To the English-language works one could now add Taub 2008, 30–55, which appeared too late for inclusion in Volk's bibliography.

³ On the *Aetna*, see Volk 2005.

while he was right, against Sudhaus, that the text is in a very poor state and frequently requires emendation, few of his own numerous conjectures have won lasting approval. He remained stubbornly unconvinced of the merits of the so-called *lectiones Gyraldinae*, readings of a now-lost manuscript recorded by Renaissance scholars; but more recent scholarship acknowledges that they are derived from an independent branch of the manuscript tradition and so of considerable importance in reconstituting the text.

So, does his edition deserve to be reprinted over a century later? Certainly his edition has been replaced for English readers by that of F. R. D. Goodyear [1965], which has now become the standard.⁴ Nevertheless, anyone who wishes to engage seriously with the poem's problems of text and interpretation should also go back to Ellis' edition. Furthermore, Ellis provides an English translation of his text. There is a more recent, and more widely used, English translation by J. W. Duff and A. M. Duff in the Loeb series [1934]; but anyone relying on a translation would be well advised to consult Ellis' too as a reminder of how much is uncertain about the text and interpretation of the poem. Finally, his commentary also contains some material of interest for the history of volcanology. Volk says [xv] that he 'appears to have had little interest in the scientific content of the poem or its poetic qualities'; and it is certainly true that he does not discuss the scientific content of the poem in the introduction, that he has little interest in the *Quellenforschung* that was fashionable at the time (save for the section of his introduction about *De mundo*), and that there is no systematic treatment of scientific topics in the commentary. Nevertheless, the commentary regularly evinces his familiarity with the widely scattered ancient literary references to volcanoes and also with 19th century writings on Etna and volcanology. This familiarity regularly enriches his notes, even though his primary focus is often—but not always—on textual problems; and so from his edition one can learn something about the scientific content and background of the poem—more than one can from Goodyear's, which confines

⁴ Goodyear's text was also included in the Oxford Classical Text edition of the *Appendix Vergiliana* [Clausen, Goodyear, Kenney, and Richmond 1966]. Since Goodyear, there have been Italian editions of *Aetna* by Traglia [1968], de Vivo [1987], and Iodice [2002] (in an edition of the whole *Appendix Vergiliana*).

itself more resolutely to textual matters. So, this reprinting of Ellis' edition is to be welcomed.

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