

“I Feel Myself Exalted above All That Is Earthly”: Vesuvius and Etna in Selected Nineteenth-Century Women’s Travel Writing

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Italy had been one of the most important destinations for Central European travellers since at least the early modern period. From the late eighteenth century onwards, increasing numbers of women from both aristocratic and bourgeois backgrounds also began to travel there. Their itineraries largely followed established patterns of travel, while southern Italy remained comparatively less frequented for some time. Its growing appeal was closely connected with the archaeological discoveries at Herculaneum and Pompeii, which transformed the Bay of Naples into a gateway to the Mediterranean and one of the iconic stages of the Italian journey. At the same time, the Enlightenment development of the natural sciences stimulated growing interest in the active volcanoes of Vesuvius and Etna. They became objects of scientific investigation, while contemporary travel writing represented them both as extraordinary natural phenomena and as part of idyllic, sublime, or Romantic landscapes. This paper examines representations of Vesuvius and Etna in selected nineteenth-century women’s travel writing, including the works of Ida Pfeiffer, Fanny Lewald, and Emily Lowe. By the first half of the nineteenth century, these volcanoes had become part of the Italian journey undertaken by a number of women travellers from Western and Central Europe. Some of them went beyond the role of passive observers of volcanic landscapes and eruptions: they undertook physically demanding ascents of the feared Italian volcanoes and subsequently transformed these experiences into literary narratives. The paper asks how these women travellers constructed volcanic landscapes through the interplay of scientific curiosity, aesthetic conventions, fear, physical experience, and the Romantic concept of the sublime. Particular attention will be paid to the ways in which the experience of climbing transformed Vesuvius and Etna from objects of distant observation into affective and embodied landscapes.

