CHAPTER SIX

THE ERUPTION OF VESUVIUS
IN THE EPISTLES OF STATIUS AND PLINY

Carole Newlands

“passion plucks no berries from the myrtle and ivy ... nor tells of rough satyrs and fauns with cloven heel. Where there is leisure for fiction there is little grief.”

Dr. Samuel Johnson (on Lycidas)

Introduction

Just a few months after the sinking of the Titanic Thomas Hardy wrote his poem on the disaster, “The Convergence of the Twain.” I quote the first seven of the eleven stanzas:

     In a solitude of the sea
     Deep from human vanity
     And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she.

     II
     Steel chambers, late the pyres
     Of her salamandrine fires,
     Cold currents thrid, and turn to rhythmic tidal lyres.

     III
     Over the mirrors meant
     To glass the opulent
     The sea-worm crawls—grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent.

     IV
     Jewels in joy designed
     To ravish the sensuous mind
     Lie lightless, all their sparkles bleared and black and blind.
What is particularly striking about this poem is its economy of expression in the face of unimaginable horror. Hardy avoids hyperbole, opting for a relatively sombre, ironical style and focussing first on the ship itself, not on its human cargo, and then on the iceberg as an unstoppable force of nature. Occasional, unusual diction, for example “salamandric” and “thrid” in stanza three, suggests the extraordinary. The poem is structured in two halves, divided between the ship and the iceberg, and turns at stanza 6 with the simple but brilliant choice of the word “well.” Enjambment between stanzas 6 and 7 then hurries the poem towards its inevitable doom-laden conclusion. Hardy’s poem demonstrates that brevity and understatement can sometimes provide a more powerful response to tragedies that are off the scale in human imagining than an aesthetics of grandeur, which runs the inevitable risk of descending to sentimentality and bathos. In historiography however, as Woodman has pointed out, magnification, vivid descriptiveness, and drama were core elements of the aesthetics of the “disaster narrative,” often with a moralising discourse; introducing his vivid account of the shipwreck of Germanicus’ fleet in the North Sea, Tacitus for instance arouses his readers’ expectations for tragic horror by commenting that it was of unusual magnitude and novelty (Ann. 2.24.1). Yet, as Hardy’s poem suggests, the