

The Recurring Grotesque in Ovid's *Amores*: A Bakhtinian Analysis

Poems 2.12-15 in Ovid's *Amores*, interpreted through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque, illuminate concepts about the human body that pervade the *Amores*. The poetry praises a physically perfect beloved, but simultaneously reveals that her supposedly perfect body is in fact grotesque. *Amores* 2.12-15 show how her body may become grotesque, and the lengths to which the elegiac lover will go to conceal its grotesquerie.

Of the many characteristics of the Bakhtinian grotesque body, the most relevant for studying elegy are swelling, incompleteness, penetrability, and fertility. Sex and pregnancy, central elements of poems 2.12-15, are quintessentially grotesque. Bakhtin argues that in the classical period, the grotesque body and its functions were excluded from high genres, of which Roman elegy is certainly one. Ovid mentions that grotesque bodily functions are inappropriate for elegy (*Remedia Amoris* 437-38), because they emphasize the orifices and materiality of the body. Elegiac bodies must be flawless and contained, like Corinna's body as described in *Amores* 1.5, where her body as a whole is flawless (*in toto nusquam corpore menda fuit*, 1.5.18), and her torso, breasts, and legs are flat, compact, and youthful (*planus, castigato, iuvenale*, 1.5.21-2), traits that are valued as physical reflections of elegiac aesthetics (Wyke 27, 67-8). Whenever the beloved's body becomes grotesque, the elegiac project is undermined. In *Amores* 2.12-15, the speaker characterizes small, refined, non-procreational elegy as embattled by a massive, crude, fertile, grotesque setting. In doing so, he draws elegy into that grotesque world. The "triumph" of love in 2.12 introduces the grotesque as a characteristic not of elegy, but of Augustus, the military, authority, and crowds. In 2.13-14, Corinna's abortion shocks the speaker by demonstrating that the *puella*'s body can become grotesque, and that *militia amoris* can actually be bloody. Because pregnancy and childbirth are incompatible with

elegy (James 176), the *amator* attempts to shift the *puella*'s pregnant grotesquerie onto a series of pregnant mothers associated with Rome and epic: Rhea Silvia's belly is swollen (*tumido ... ventre*, 2.14.15); Venus is "heavy" because Aeneas is in her womb (*gravida ... in alvo*, 2.14.17).

The bodies of mothers of Rome swell grotesquely, but the *puella*'s body should not.

In 2.15, the speaker fantasizes that he has turned into a ring, formally a feminine object in the grotesque (Bakhtin 243), then imagines himself, as a ring being given to his *puella* so that he can secretly explore her body. He thus attempts to separate the *puella* from the grotesque by making his own body all-encompassing and grotesque. As the ring, he exhibits both male and female genitalia. The *amator*/ring displays tenacious female sexuality when it "wears down" (*teras*, 2.15.6) and clings to the *puella*'s finger (*adstringens digitos orbe minore tuos*, 2.15.20), but later will have an erection (*mea membra libidine surgent*, 2.15.25). The *amator* takes all sexual functions onto himself to spare the *puella* from the sexual grotesque. The *amator*/ring further denies that it is a burden upon her finger (*quodve tener digitus recuset, onus*, 2.15.22). This passage parallels 2.14.14 (*iusta recusasset pondera ferre Thetis*), and attempts to replace pregnant, grotesque weight with elegiac lightness. Poem 2.15 illustrates the speaker's desperation to avert the grotesque from the *puella*, and also illustrates its inevitability: he cannot banish the grotesque body from his poetry, but can only transfer it from one character to another.

Elegy can survive a grotesque speaker, but the *puella*'s semi-divine perfection of the *puella* must remain: if the speaker cannot profess love for a physically perfect woman, his love could become ridiculous or vanish altogether (Damer, forthcoming). The *puella*'s body, however, is naturally fallible and, as indicated in the *Ars Amatoria*, is kept desirable only by great effort on her part. Conversely, elegy cannot exist without an antagonistic background, because it would mean nothing for an elegist to declare his girl more precious than the state and its wars, if the

state were unimportant. Elegy needs the grotesque world as a contrast to itself. The grotesque, however, does not stay peacefully beside genres that it can engulf, so it makes inroads on elegy. Ovid's speaker tries to keep his mistress' body non-grotesque, but cannot do so forever. As the *amator* uses the grotesque to mock the values alien to elegy, so the grotesque makes elegy look impossible even as the elegist pretends not to notice.

Bibliography

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