Mihi blanditias dixit: the Puella as Poet in Amores 3.7

In Amores 3.7, Ovid describes the lover-poet in a difficult position: he has been unable to achieve an erection while trying sleep with a beautiful puella. The poem describes her repeated attempts to excite him and their mutual frustration at her lack of success, until she finally scolds him and walks away. I argue that Ovid describes the unnamed puella as a failed elegist in this poem, and that her failure is part of a broader pattern of disengagement from elegy in the third book of the Amores.

Amores 3.7 has received relatively little scholarly attention, as only four articles focus on this poem. Baeza Angulo compares Amores 3.7 with other ancient literature on impotence (1989), Mauger-Plichon examines the poem alongside parts of the Satyrica and Maximianus 5 (1999), and Holzberg argues that Ovid almost breaches the propriety of elegiac diction in Amores 3.7 (2009). I build on Sharrock’s 1995 article, which presents a metapoetic reading of the poem: that Ovid blurs the line between sex and poetry in Amores 3.7, allowing the reader to interpret the lover-poet’s impotence not just as literal, but also as poetic. I focus on the puella’s role as a poet, rather than on the amator, and therefore also engage with Wyke’s (e.g. 1987) and James’ (2003) discussions of the elegiac mistress as a poetic fiction, as well as Keith’s examination of elegiac language used to describe Corinna in Amores 1.5 (1994).

First, I demonstrate that Ovid describes the puella of Amores 3.7 in language typical of elegiac aesthetics, such as culta (1), tenera (53), and molliter (74). Second, I note that she literally speaks in elegiac meter as one of the few women in the Amores to deliver a direct speech (77-80). Third, I consider a particularly suggestive couplet: et mihi blanditias dixit dominumque vocavit / et quae praeterea publica verba iuvant (11-12; “And she spoke sweet-
nothing to me and she called me master and other words too that are usually pleasing”).

_Blanditiae_ can mean “elegiac poems” as well as “sweet-nothings” (Keith 1994, 32). By calling him _dominum_, the _puella_ appropriates normal elegiac practice, in which the lover-poet refers to his girl as _domina_, for her own attempted seduction. Her _publica verba_ may be interpreted as universally pleasing words (_OLD_ s.v. _publicus_ 5b), words in keeping with the propriety of elegiac diction (Sharrock 1995, 167), or as a pun on Ovid’s praenomen Publius. In this reading, the _publica verba_ may be not just the kind of words that would please anyone, but perhaps also words spoken in an Ovidian, elegiac style. Fourth, I examine mythological examples in the poem that situate the _puella_ as a poet, such as a description of her persuading rocks and oaks to move, which places her in the tradition of mythical poets like Orpheus and Amphion (57-58), and a comparison between her and Phemius (61), a bard in the _Odyssey_. Fifth, I suggest that Ovid’s description of her departure is suggestive of a poetic pun. He writes: _decuit nudos proripuisse pedes_ (82; “It became her to have rushed away on bare feet,”). This line echoes _Am._ 1.1, where Ovid writes that Cupid _unum surripuisse pedem_ (4; “stole away one foot”) to change the meter of his poetry from dactylic hexameter to elegiac couplets. If we read _pedes_ in _Amores_ 3.7 as a reference to meter too and _nudos_ as “not softened or veiled” (_OLD_ s.v. _nudus_ 14b) or perhaps “frank,” a second possible reading of this line emerges: “It was right that she snatched away her overly frank poetry,” referring to her angry speech at the end of the poem (77-80). Finally, just as the lover-poet’s impotence marks him as a failed elegist, the _puella_’s inability to seduce him marks her as a failed poet. This double failure is in keeping with a larger pattern of disengagement from erotic elegy in the third book of the _Amores_, where Ovid marks his interest in moving on to other genres. The _puella_’s role as poet and her failure are therefore part of a larger movement away from elegy in the final book of the collection.
Bibliography


