

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-

nothings 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: *decurit 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.

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