11 *Tibullus 3.9, 3.13, 3.14, 3.16; L'Année Epigraphique 1928.73; Cicero Ad Familiares 4.5*

Writings by and about the Augustan elegist Sulpicia

In the third book of poetry that is said to be the work of the Augustan elegist Tibullus, elegies eight through eighteen feature a female poet-speaker, twice referred to by the name Sulpicia. These elegies represent her as associated with the affluent, privileged, and cultured household of Tibullus' own literary patron, Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, consul in 31 BCE. A statement by the fourth-century CE Christian author Jerome helps to explain this woman's relationship with Messalla. For he reports at *Adversus Iovinanum* 1.46 that Messalla's sister Valeria refused to remarry after the death of her husband, the distinguished legal authority Servius Sulpicius Rufus, in 43 BCE. Under these circumstances, this Valeria would have then become her brother's legal ward.

What is more, in elegy 3.12, the female poet-speaker mentions keeping erotic secrets from her mother; in 3.16 she prides herself on being "Servius' daughter Sulpicia." Scholars have therefore identified this Sulpicia as Valeria's daughter and Messalla's niece, living under his legal guardianship when she composed her poetry: presumably because she was husbandless as well as fatherless at the time. That time seems to have been around 19 BCE, when Tibullus is known to have died.

The eleven Sulpicia elegies chronicle her passionate love affair with a young man whom she calls by the pseudonym Cerinthus. His name evokes that of a hot-blooded male whom we have encountered Horace reprimanding in *Satires* 1.2, for favoring illicit liaisons with well-born, expensively adorned women; Sulpicia calls to mind the females that Horace's Cerinthus prefers by detailing her own jewels and costly attire, and by confessing that *peccasse iuvat*, "it's pleasurable to have misbehaved" with her lover. But the name Cerinthus also puns on the Greek and Latin words for "wax," and thereby makes an erudite allusion to the wax tablets on which she wrote her poetry.

The four elegies selected for inclusion—3.9, 3.13, 3.14, and 3.16—illustrate the learning and literary skill that Sulpicia's elegies display, features of her poetry that have led many scholars to doubt that she, or any Roman woman, could have authored these elegies, particularly the first five, which are longer and more complex than the second six. Her frankness about the illicit erotic joys that her poetry celebrates has troubled scholars as well, especially those who assume, without any justification, that she must be a never-married girl in her early teens. Such scholars claim that a young woman of Sulpicia's background would not have dared to publicize her involvement in impermissible sexual conduct, nor have acquired the literary education and skills to produce poetry of high quality.

If, however, our poet-speaker is the daughter of the Servius Sulpicius who died in 43 BCE, and if her poems date to around 19 BCE, at the time Sulpicia wrote these elegies she would have been in her mid-twenties and likely to have been married at least once—and subsequently widowed or divorced—already. She would have interacted with the poets fostered by her uncle as a contemporary and equal. Indeed, she would have been about the same age as another one of Messalla's protégés, the poet Ovid, born in 43 BCE himself, who began to write his early love elegies, the *Amores*, at the time of Tibullus' death as well. So, too, the last six of Sulpicia's elegies are just as complex and learned as the first five. Both 3.9 and 3.13, for example, echo the language and revisit the themes of Dido's love affair with Aeneas in Vergil's *Aeneid*; 3.13 alludes to Homer's portrayal of Helen in the *Iliad* as well.

The recent rediscovery by Jane Stevenson and Janet Fairweather of *AE* 1928.73, an epitaph in the elegiac couplet from the city of Rome, datable to around 20 BCE, has done much to quell suspicions about Sulpicia's authorship of the eleven Sulpicia-elegies. Commemorating a Greek slave *lectrix*, a woman who read and performed literature aloud, named Sulpicia Petale, this inscription shares striking stylistic similarities with the eleven elegies, and is thus attributed to Sulpicia herself. Like the eleven Sulpicia-elegies, the Petale-inscription is noteworthy for its clever wordplay: we find, for example, an allusion to both the dead woman and the author of

the epitaph in the opening word, *Sulpiciae*. The presence in Sulpicia's household of a female slave who recited Greek and Latin literary texts does, of course, much to account for the learned allusions to earlier poetic works in Sulpicia's elegies.

Finally, although such ancient authors as Horace, Ovid, and the younger Pliny claim that both Sulpicia's father Servius Sulpicius Rufus and uncle Messalla wrote erotic poetry themselves, a letter from her father to his friend Cicero suggests that, had he lived to read Sulpicia's poems, he might not have approved of their content. Written to console Cicero on the death of his own daughter Tullia, and describing what Sulpicius believed a young woman of their social background should hope to achieve in life, it propounds an entirely different set of values and priorities than those celebrated by Sulpicia's elegies and epitaph for Petale.

Tibullus (Sulpicia) 3.9

In this, the second of the eleven Sulpicia-elegies and the first to feature her lover Cerinthus, the poet-speaker voices a series of complex emotional reactions to the prospect of his participating in a hunting expedition. She first addresses the wild boar he proposes to hunt, begging him to spare her lover; after blaming the goddess of hunting, Diana, for luring Cerinthus away, she proceeds to denounce hunting as a form of madness. But in line 10, now addressing Cerinthus, she expresses her wish to accompany him on the hunt, and her hopes that she will be found making love with him in front of the hunting nets, thereby enabling the wild boar to depart unharmed.

In the final six lines of the poem she addresses Cerinthus again, insisting that there be no loving on the hunt without her, and indeed threatening any woman who stealthily usurps her place of love with being torn to pieces by wild beasts. She then concludes by ordering Cerinthus to leave hunting to his father, and return to her embrace. Although this twenty-four–line elegy is written in the first person, its narrative complexity has led scholars to view this elegy, along with the other, learned and relatively long elegies 8–12, as by a more literarily accomplished male friend of Sulpicia's. Its allusions to the hunt in

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