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THE POETRY OF SULPICIA

by
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for Professor Joan O'Brien
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In the quest for a thesis for this paper I became interested in three remarkable women from ancient Greece and Italy: Aspasia in Athens, and Julia (Major) and Sulpicia in Rome. Aspasia was a powerful woman who used her intellect and wit to rise to great heights, and ultimately shared a prestigious position with her common-law husband, Pericles. Aspasia was non-traditional in another way as well. Indeed, reports state she had been a *hetaera*¹ before her affiliation with Pericles, and even sold other women as such. Still, she was well-respected and seems to have enjoyed an egalitarian relationship with her husband as well as with other influential Athenians of her time, including Socrates.

Julia was the outspoken, intelligent and witty daughter of the emperor Augustus. Julia ignored social *mores* and engaged in extramarital affairs openly and without shame. Because of this blatant disregard of her father's strict Julian marriage laws, she was banished from her home and eventually starved to death.

Finally, however, I chose to concentrate on Sulpicia, a poet whose work is the only extant poetry from the classical period by a Roman woman.² Sulpicia's poetry is at times unclear and difficult to translate. Because of this, it is considered by most scholars to be adequate at best, and I agree with this

¹Highly educated prostitute or female companion.

²Although others are said to have authored texts, none have survived.

assessment. There are two major problems which arise in attempting to judge Sulpicia's literary abilities. The first is the small collection of poems credited to her,³ which makes impartial evaluation of her writing style difficult. The second problem is Sulpicia's ambiguous language, which I will address at length later in this paper.

First, I will briefly describe Sulpicia's background and define the type of poetry she wrote. I will then examine and comment on two of her poems, the first and fourth in her series (4.7 and 4.10), and present translations of them. Next, I will list important criticisms of her work by Gruppe, Smith, Creekmore, Davies and Pomeroy, along with more recent positive appraisals by Santirocco, Lowe and Roessel. I will explain why I reject the autobiographical approach that Gruppe, Smith and Creekmore take when evaluating Sulpicia's poetry, while agreeing with their judgment of her poetic skill. Finally, I will give reasons for my opinion that Sulpicia deserves more attention and respect from historians and classicists alike, if not for her literary capabilities, then for the invaluable

³Sulpicia's only known work are six short poems contained in the *Corpus Tibullianum*. Five much longer poems which elaborate on her poetry are attached to these six. Some scholars believe they are the work of Tibullus, others simply refer to their author as the *amicus Sulpiciae*, and E. Bréguet attributes them to Ovid.

information she provides us about the life of women in antiquity.⁴

Sulpicia came from an ancient aristocratic background. She was the daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus, the son of an old friend of Cicero's. Her mother was probably Valeria, a sister of M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus, who was a patron of literature during Augustus. At the time Sulpicia wrote her poetry her father seems to have been dead, and since she was an unmarried woman, she was probably under her uncle Messalla's guardianship. Messalla was the patron of the elegiac poets Ovid, Propertius and Tibullus, whose literary interests he shared.

Elegists typically railed against the traditional ideals of their society by writing poetry reversing the subservient and confined role women played in Rome with the more empowered and assertive role of men. Because of this, their work can be called "counter-cultural." The elegiac poet relied on his beloved for his emotional welfare, and after he admonished her for her frequent and indiscriminate infidelities, he forgave her. In addition, he promised to be faithful to his loved one. Love elegists also strove to convince others of the wisdom of their unconventional vision of social life.

Given the fact that Ovid, Propertius and Tibullus were regular guests in

⁴Since Sulpicia's is the only extant poetry from classical Rome, we do not have a context for comparison for a typical woman's viewpoint during that time.

Sulpicia's home, it is small wonder she chose to write elegiac poetry. She remains true to elegiac traditions by using a Greek name for her lover (Cerinthus), and like other elegists she berates him for his infidelity. Indeed, Sulpicia writes about Cerinthus exactly as a male elegist would write about his female beloved (Hinds 1987, 43), and her themes were the same as those of her male counterparts.⁵ In addition, she exhibits a social defiance which was common of elegists. One respect in which she differs from other elegiac poets, however, is in her infrequent mythological allusions.⁶

Now I will turn to what I consider to be the introduction to Sulpicia's series of elegies.

4.7 (3.16)

Tandem venit amor, qualem texisse pudori
 quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama⁷ magis.
 exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis
 attulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.
 exsolvit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,
 dicetur si quis non habuisse sua.
 non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,
 ne legat id nemo quam meus ante, velim,

⁵ In the first poem she sings the praises of her love, in the second and third she speaks of her birthday, in the fourth she chastises her lover for his infidelity, in the fifth she speaks of an illness, and in the last she apologizes to Cerinthus for past sexual misgivings.

⁶Except for her mention of Camenae (Muses) and Cytherea (Venus).

⁷ *fama* is related to *fari*, "to speak."

sed peccasse iuvat, vultus componere famae
taedet: cum digno digna fuisse⁸ ferar.

At last I have found a love so wonderful that I would much rather have it be known than to hide it from anyone.

After I persuaded Cythera with my poetry, she carried him to me and put him into my lap.

Venus kept her promise: let someone tell my joys, someone who is said not to have had joys of his own.

I would not wish to entrust anything to sealed tablets, lest anyone read it before my lover does.

But to have sinned delights me, to put on a façade bores me: may I be reported as a woman worthy to have made love to a deserving man.

When Sulpicia's poems were initially discovered in the *Corpus Tibullianum* in 1871, this was indeed the first in her sequence. Later, however, scholars moved it to the end to form what they considered the proper chronological sequence. Their reasoning was to create the impression that Sulpicia remained chaste throughout the saga of her poetry,⁹ only giving herself to Cerinthus in the end. In my view, Sulpicia intended this poem to be an introduction to her corpus, and I agree with Matthew Santirocco and other recent classicists who reject the repositioning of this poem from first to last. Even though the sentiment expressed in 4.7 was most likely the culmination of Sulpicia's stormy love affair with Cerinthus, I believe that she meant it as an

⁸ *cum fuisse* is a sexual euphemism for intercourse.

⁹ Indeed, the message is clear that Sulpicia is sexually involved with her lover by this time.

opening statement. Furthermore, this elegy is Sulpicia's proclamation of reciprocated love for Cerinthus: a declaration of independence which must have been intended to set the mood for the rest of her work. Sulpicia follows 4.7 with earlier poems looking back in time to the ordeals of her relationship.

In all of her other poems, Sulpicia addresses a specific person: either her uncle or Cerinthus. But in this elegy there is no addressee, and because of this Kirby Flower Smith has compared it to a journal entry (Smith [1913] 1979, 79). Indeed, Smith believes that Sulpicia wanted to keep this poem to herself. On the contrary, I think Sulpicia fully intended for it to be published because she is so proud of it as a testament to her love's success (4.7,3-4). Another indication of intended publication is 4.7,10: 'let me be made public,' or 'I will be made public.'¹⁰ Sulpicia uses her poetry as a vehicle for publicizing her relationship. It allows her to announce her love for Cerinthus and to celebrate her decision to stand up against public scrutiny (4.7,9-10).

Smith believes that Sulpicia uses the subjunctive *sit* (4.7,2) in this elegy to convey fantasy, not serious intent. I view this subjunctive quite differently, however. *Sit* tells the reader that Sulpicia will not keep her love hidden: such an act *would be* more shameful to her. The next two indicative main verbs, *attulit*

¹⁰ *Ferar* can either be taken as a jussive subjunctive or a future indicative (Miller 1994, 32).

and *deposuit*, suggest a strong conviction that her *Camena* (Poetry) made this relationship possible. She recognizes Venus's help, but adds that she received it only after her poetry prevails upon the goddess (4.7,3).

The first part of the fourth distich is puzzling. Some believe that Sulpicia is afraid to write anything to Cerinthus for fear others would learn of their affair (4.7,7-8). But perhaps she only means that she wants Cerinthus to read it first, before anyone else. Indeed, the implication in 4.7,8 is that she is worried that someone besides her beloved might read it first: 'lest someone read it before my lover does.' Whatever the reason, by using an emphatic double negative (*ne . . . nemo*)¹¹ Sulpicia communicates her seriousness.

David Roessel offers an interesting alternative to the standard translation of this couplet, seeing a link between *tabellis* and Cerinthus.¹² In his view, Sulpicia is saying that Venus placed wax (*tabellis*) in her lap, and the result was a poem so good that it would be more shameful to keep it hidden than to make it public. As appealing as this interpretation may sound, I do not believe the text allows this. *Tabellis* is feminine plural and *illum* is an accusative singular of a

¹¹See 4.7,8.

¹²Roessel believes Sulpicia chose the name "Cerinthus" because of its link with wax. Writing tablets were covered with wax on which letters could be composed and erased. Further, sources indicate the name was restricted to slaves and freedmen. Hence, "wax was the poet's servant both in the process of creation and the dissemination of her words" (1990, 245).

demonstrative pronoun. Since Sulpicia would have used a plural pronoun to refer to both *tabellis* and her lover, the reference must be to Cerinthus. Another point Roessel makes concerning wax tablets is that Sulpicia emphasizes her sincerity by using *signatis . . . tabellis*¹³ (1990, 250). This argument can neither be proven nor disproven.

In the last distich, Sulpicia uses two strong indicative verbs, *iuvat*, and *taedet*. She takes a very courageous position for an upper-class unmarried Roman woman when she tells us that she's happy to have sinned: *peccasse iuvat* (4.7,9). Sulpicia realizes that there will be gossip and she does not care. One sees another example of her courage in the next statement (4.7,9-10), where her use of the powerful *taedet* clearly indicates that putting on a façade bores her. In her closing statement, Sulpicia wants something made public: either her relationship with Cerinthus or her poetry. Her final line reinforces her equality with her lover: *cum digno digna*.¹⁴

Next I will present the fourth in Sulpicia's group of elegies.

¹³See 4.7,7. Sealed tablets (*signatis tabellis*) were folded over and waxed, called *duplices tabellae*. In love poetry and amorous correspondence, *duplices tabellae* also implied deceit. Therefore, an unsealed tablet would be truthful, not duplex (Roessel 1990, 250).

¹⁴ These three words emphasize the idea of equivalence or . . . reciprocity or mutuality (Smith [1913] 1979, 508).

4.10 (3.13)

Gratum est, securus multum quod iam tibi de me
 permittis, subito ne male inepta cadam.
 sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo
 scortum quam Servi filia Sulpicia.
 solliciti sunt pro nobis, quibus illa dolori est
 ne cedam ignoto, maxima causa, toro.

Thanks for taking me for granted, lest I, suddenly, badly and foolishly fall.
 Go ahead and prefer a toga'd harlot struggling with her little servant's basket to
 Sulpicia, daughter of Servius.
 My friends are worried about me, those whose main concern is that you might
 choose an obscure woman over me.

The tone of this elegy is markedly different than that of 4.7. Its position as fourth in her group serves as a reminder to Sulpicia and her audience that the elation of 4.7 was a battle which she fought hard to win. In this poem, Sulpicia has evidently learned of Cerinthus's infidelity with a woman of a lower social status than her own, and she chides her lover for his unfaithfulness. Sulpicia uses the two weapons available to her to cope with her humiliation: her poetry and her social position. One can easily detect both the poet's wounded pride and her enduring strength in this highly emotional elegy.

In the first couplet, Sulpicia uses bitter irony to communicate the pain she feels. *Ne male . . . cadam* can be interpreted in different ways depending upon the choice of meaning for *male* and *cadam*. *Male* is an adverb indicating ill or harm, and *cadam* means either falling or sinking. Loving Cerinthus would

prove harmful to Sulpicia, and I believe this is the point she wants to make.

Apparently, the consummation of 4.7 has not yet occurred and for that she is grateful. Sulpicia maintains that she has been spared a great deal of hardship by seeing her beloved's true nature.

In the second couplet, Sulpicia feigns indifference to Cerinthus's disloyalty, and belittles the object of his affection. Sulpicia expresses jealousy by choosing adjectives with the most negative connotations to describe this other woman: *toga*,¹⁵ *quasillo*¹⁶ and *scortum*.¹⁷ Interpretations for this couplet vary, and some scholars translate *toga* as referring to Cerinthus. Indeed, this is the most common meaning of *toga*, and could mean the concern which Cerinthus has for his own Roman citizen's toga. However, as Kerstin Miller points out, the *-que* attached to *pressum*, "adds an explanation to the preceding *toga*" (1994, 64). Thus, the *toga* refers to the girl. In 4.10,4, Sulpicia puts *scortum* and *Sulpicia*¹⁸ in

¹⁵This is a demeaning reference to the women's toga, worn by prostitutes and others of their ilk, to whom the *stola* was denied.

¹⁶A *quasillum* is a little basket filled with wool. Used with *pressum*, Sulpicia refers graphically to a *quasillaria* or "basket-wench" of even lower status than the household slave girl: in addition to other chores, she had to spin for a living. The hours were long and the job was dull (Smith [1913] 1979, 514).

¹⁷This was the most common word for prostitute and the most defamatory as well.

¹⁸Sulpicia ends all the pentameters in her poems with an iambic disyllable except in this case (Santirocco 1979, 236). By placing her name here, Sulpicia adds extra emphasis.

the two most emphasized positions of the line, thus highlighting her social status as daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus, son of a distinguished patrician lawyer of the same name (Hinds 1987, 64).

The last distich is the most troublesome of the elegy. The first two words, *solliciti sunt*, are vague, possibly by intention. The two most probable meanings are either that Sulpicia is attempting to make Cerinthus jealous by alluding to his possible rivals, or that Sulpicia wants Cerinthus to know that she has good friends who care about her. In either case, Sulpicia's point is that other people are involved in the outcome of their relationship; people who are interested in Sulpicia's well-being--people who are on her side. The next two words, *pro nobis*, are equally ambiguous. Some scholars translate them, 'for us,' or 'on our behalf,' but I agree with Kerstin Miller that *nobis* is a poetic plural. Just as Sulpicia declares her independence from Roman society in 4.7, so she declares her independence here from Cerinthus.

The *illa* in the third couplet is unclear, as well, and seemingly without any poetic justification. It agrees with *maxima causa* in the last line, and could refer to the toga-clad harlot of the second couplet. Therefore, the rest of the distich starting at *quibus* would translate, 'those whose greatest cause for anguish is that woman, lest I yield to an obscure woman.' This version, however, seems unnecessarily redundant. Consequently, I have chosen an alternative, 'those

whose main concern is that you might choose an obscure woman over me.' In my view, this is another instance of Sulpicia's clumsy grammar.

In the final distich, *ignoto toro* is yet another vague term. Among other things, *torus* can mean 'marriage,' 'marriage bed,' and 'woman.' If Sulpicia meant for it to refer to marriage, then it would certainly mean marriage to Cerinthus and would translate as 'an obscure marriage.' However, there is substantial evidence in the *Garland* that Cerinthus was a Roman gentleman and as such would not be considered obscure. Thus, Sulpicia is most likely referring to the *scortum* and again flaunts her noble background by comparing it to that of Cerinthus's new love interest.

The history of criticism of Sulpicia has been mixed. I will summarize initially the negative remarks of the early critics before turning to more recent evaluations. Otto Gruppe was the first to identify Sulpicia's poetry as separate from that of Tibullus, and he coined the term, "Feminine Latin" to describe her writing style. His opinion can be taken as a typical example of most classical scholars:

"True, they are metrically correct, yet at the same time they are little more. It is evident they come from no practised hand: the expression is awkward, the construction often put together only with difficulty. . . . The obscurity of construction . . . where the words yield grammatical sense only under duress and the meaning is likewise uncertain. On close inspection the critic will readily recognise here a *feminine Latin*, [italics Lowe's] impervious to analysis by rigorous linguistic method, but which

finds natural, simple expressions for everyday ideas without conscious and artistic elaboration of style . . ." (Lowe 1988, 194).

Kirby Flower Smith also manages to damn Sulpicia with faint praise. For example: ". . . This slip of a girl," he states, "has that rarest of all gifts, the gift of straightforward simplicity. . ." (Smith [1913] 1979, 79). I have searched in vain for Sulpicia's alleged "straightforward simplicity." As I suggest, she is much more complicated than Smith portrays.

It is Smith's use of autobiographical assumptions as the basis of literary criticism which are both irrelevant and insulting. For instance,

"She certainly does not rank among the great poets of the world, even her mastery of technique occasionally suggests an amateur, and after her marriage she probably never wrote another line" (80).

There is no proof of Sulpicia's presumed marriage; the only knowledge of it is based on a later poem of Tibullus. Smith continues his autobiographical suppositions: ". . . it is fair to suspect that she was somewhat wilful and, let us confess it, a trifle spoiled" (77). Clearly, this type of conjecture has absolutely no relevance to Sulpicia's talent as a writer.

Continuing the autobiographical criticism, Hubert Creekmore believes that Sulpicia never meant her poems to be "artistic creations," and offers his explanation of why Sulpicia would bother to write in meter if she did not intend her work to be published:

"One should realize that her love for Cerinthus was a very delicate, rather secret and, judging from his attitude, by no means reassuring matter. Her mother, Valeria, was . . . planning a 'proper match' the worst of it all was that Cerinthus was a very shy young man. In her first two notes to him, she had to suggest, and in no uncertain terms, the bent of her mind" (Creekmore 1966, 106).

Creekmore would have us believe, then, that Sulpicia wrote her poetry in meter for the sole purpose of attracting Cerinthus to her. Indeed, in Creekmore's view, Sulpicia must have known that she would never have a relationship with him unless she initiated it herself, since Cerinthus was "very shy." This is another example of an autobiographical assumption, and as such is not convincing. For similar reasons, he is not persuasive when he explains why we only have these six short poems from Sulpicia:

"If she did marry the young man, perhaps their life together was too full of happiness for her to think of writing more But perhaps marriage was the door to deep sorrow, a despair to which her *modest talent* [italics mine] could not, had not the heart to, give expression" (106-107).

Gruppe's, Smith's and Creekmore's autobiographical approaches to Sulpicia are totally out of place in literary studies. Furthermore, Creekmore is not convinced that this poetry was written by Sulpicia alone. Even though he evaluates her work as that of an amateur, he does not believe she could have created it by herself. Instead, he fancies that Tibullus co-authored it.

Ceri Davies, on the contrary, limits himself to literary criticism. Davies evaluates Sulpicia's writing on its own merits, without autobiographical

overtones. He calls her elegies "in-poetry:" a type of poetry which is written and read by people who are intimately acquainted, and by close friends whose relationships are well known to each other, but that are not common knowledge outside their circle.

"By far the most interesting poems of the *Corpus* for illuminating relations with Messalla within the household, and also for giving us a picture of poetic activity on an *uninhibited, unambitious* level, [italics mine] are those written by and connected with the name of the girl Sulpicia" (Davies 1973, 32).

Sulpicia's poems, then, regardless of her writing skill, are an important window into the ancient world of women.

Criticisms of Sulpicia does not come only from males, however. Indeed, in her book Sarah Pomeroy states, "she was not a brilliant artist; her work is of interest only because the author is female" (Pomeroy 1975, 173). Though I agree with Pomeroy's judgment of Sulpicia's work, she should have elaborated further on the gender issue by adding that the poems are of interest because they offer us a rare glimpse into classical Rome from a woman's perspective.

In recent years, however, classicists like Santirocco, Lowe and Roessel are offering more positive analyses of Sulpicia's poetic abilities and are attempting to change the traditional opinion that her work is inferior to that of other poets. For example, Matthew Santirocco argues that, "a careful reading of Sulpicia tends to suggest that factors extraneous to the poems themselves [i.e., the biases

of the translators] must have contributed to this inadequate view" (Santirocco 1979, 238). Santirocco also recognizes Sulpicia's contribution to our understanding of a woman's life in ancient Rome and credits her for writing such bold poetry against the odds:

"As a woman, Sulpicia held up a mirror to the private world inhabited by the women of her class. A birthday, a picnic, an uncle, a lover--to acknowledge in this way the insulated nature of her achievement is to recognize the impositions an androcentric society makes upon women" (239).

Santirocco not only credits Sulpicia with this sociological observation, he also points out that she possessed a literary talent which made up for her lack of advantages:

"The limitations imposed on Sulpicia's poetry from without are handsomely compensated from within by the poet's technique and awareness of literary tradition, features which demonstrate professionalism and creativity within the admittedly restricted sphere" (239).

N. J. Lowe also takes issue with earlier criticisms of Sulpicia's poetry and writes that, "if Sulpicia has a failing, it is if anything an excess of intellectual control" (Lowe 1988, 205). In his view, her verse techniques:

". . . look ahead in general spirit . . . to that youthful hanger-on of Messalla's coterie¹⁹ whose hand has so often been seen in other poems of the *Corpus* and who was in the next generation to extend and harmonize the slick irony and formal virtuosity of Sulpician epigram to the annihilation of Augustan elegy and willful

¹⁹Lowe is referring to Ovid.

subversion of every surviving poetic genre in Latin. Perhaps, after all, Sulpicia is not such a minor figure" (205).

David Roessel credits Sulpicia for restoring some reality to the literary realm by depicting herself as dependent on two men (her uncle in one of the birthday poems, and Cerinthus), instead of continuing in the tradition of male elegists that the woman was dominant. He concludes, therefore, that "Sulpicia thought seriously about her poetry and its place in literature. This is not the attitude of a genial amateur" (Roessel 1990, 250).

In sum, Sulpicia was well-versed in Roman elegy and painstakingly observed elegiac traditions. It is also a clear possibility that Sulpicia intended the troublesome passages in her six short poems to be open to different interpretations by different people. However, regardless of whether she meant to be ambiguous, I am unable to defend the creativity of her poetry because her language is often awkward and difficult to understand. Nevertheless, literary criticisms notwithstanding, Sulpicia's poems provide a rare and important window into the life of one woman in antiquity.

It is amazing to me that Sulpicia is almost unknown except to classical scholars, and that even by these she is often ignored. Surprisingly, Sulpicia was omitted in a 1975 article titled, "The Role of Women in Roman Elegy," written by feminist Judith Hallett. Recently, however, Lefkowitz and Fant included her in

the second edition of their sourcebook on ancient women. In my view, Sulpicia's contributions, both as woman and as poet, should be more acknowledged, and her work should be taught alongside that of Sappho. Although she may not be in the same literary league as her Greek counterpart, Sulpicia nonetheless deserves recognition and respect for her accomplishments. That Sulpicia, an upper-class noblewoman in Augustan Rome, wrote erotic love poetry mimicking that of radical elegists is remarkable in itself, but that hers is the only surviving poetry written by a woman is extraordinary. Women of that time were not generally given the opportunity nor the encouragement to express their views, yet the poems of Sulpicia are preserved in a book authored by a respected lyricist. Although we probably will never know the circumstances that led to their inclusion within the *Corpus*, the fact remains that Sulpicia's poems must have been placed there with good reason. To deny students of the classics and of history the chance to study Sulpicia's poems seems unjust, both to the students and to the memory of Sulpicia.

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