
Scholarly Reception of Sulpicia: A Victim of Early Sexist Scholarship

By Aaron Pearce

Roman love elegy is dominated by the voices of male poet-lovers. Sulpicia is the only extant female love elegist, but her work is often viewed by scholars as frivolous or less skilled than that of the other Roman elegists.¹ The sexism which characterised early scholarship has resulted in Sulpicia's literature being viewed as an amateurish imitation of the literature of the canonical elegists. This paper will argue that due to the rampant sexism present in early scholarship, scholarly reception of Sulpicia's work has been tainted. As such, Sulpicia's poetry has been erroneously viewed as frivolous, a mere accessory to the male Roman elegists, lacking skill, refinement, and considered to be "amateurish." In spite of this, recent scholarship has argued that Sulpicia's poetry possesses a similar level of skill, and range of themes, to that of other Roman elegists and that many of the criticized elements of her poetry that have been attributed to amateurism may, in fact, have been stylistic choices.² While Sulpicia does make fewer allusions to male-dominated epics and mythological literature, she does rely heavily on Virgil's *Aeneid*, likely due to the presence of a prominent female figure in the work, Dido. Analyzing Sulpicia's use of elegiac motifs, themes, and allusions through her distinctly aristocratic female perspective reveals the meticulous skill and ability characteristic of the elegiac poets. Despite this skill, Sulpicia's work is treated as frivolous and she remains largely unacknowledged for her skilled elegiac poetry.

Little is known about Sulpicia and her poetry; even her identity is contested, with some scholars arguing that the works were written by a man imitating the voice of a woman.³ The works of Sulpicia exist entirely in book 3 of Tibullus' corpus and appear to have been appended to Tibullus' books, alongside poems from other members of his poetic circle.⁴ As such, which poems can and should be attributed to Sulpicia is a highly contested subject. For the purpose of this essay, poems 3.13-3.18 in the Tibullan corpus will be considered to have been written by Sulpicia, in accordance with J. P. Postgate's division of the corpus.⁵ Writing in the 18th century, Christian Gottlob Heynes was the first scholar to suggest the possibility that these poems may have been written by a historical Augustan woman.⁶ Further, Heynes challenged traditions which aimed to depict Sulpicia as Tibullus' beloved, Delia, and also rejected the notion that the poems were written by Tibullus using a persona.⁷ In fact, Heynes argues that because literature was

¹ Alison Keith, "Tandem Venit Amor: A Woman Speaks of Love," in *Roman Sexualities*, eds. Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): 299.

² Nick Lowe, "Sulpicia's Syntax," *Classical Quarterly* 38 (1988): 205.

³ Stefanie Kletke, "Why is Sulpicia a Woman?," *Mouseion* 13, no. 3 (2016): 626-627.

⁴ Mathilde Skoie, "The Woman," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea Thorson (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 285.

⁵ J.P. Postgate, ed., *Catullus, Tibullus, Pervigilium Veneris*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 285.

⁶ Mathilde Skoie, *Reading Sulpicia: Commentaries 1475-1900*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

flourishing in the Augustan period nothing was to prevent a historical elite woman, such as Sulpicia, from partaking in the composition of elegiac poems. Despite displaying some indecisiveness on the issue, Heynes attributed far more poems to Sulpicia than the general consensus which has been reached by most scholars, including what we now consider poems to be written in response to Sulpicia, often referred to as Sulpicia's garland.⁸ It would not be until 1838, when Otto Gruppe argued that the poems were positively created by an Augustan woman, that the female authorship of these poems was widely accepted.⁹ Gruppe's division of Sulpician poetry and the separation of the garland as a product of poetic circles surrounding her is still the most common division used today. However, Gruppe incorrectly characterised Sulpicia's poetry as the clumsy and amateurish expressions of a woman. Despite Gruppe's mischaracterization of Sulpicia's poetry as amateurish, he did maintain that the poems were written by a historical Sulpicia, challenging the work of many of his contemporaries and setting the stage for later research.¹⁰ Thus, Gruppe's work could be said to have allowed the poetry of Sulpicia to be examined as the perspective of a woman on elegy and life in Augustan Rome; rejecting the notion that these poems were created by Tibullus or another male poet as a creative outlet or poetic game.

Sulpicia's poetry has not been given the same attention and treatment of the Roman male elegiac poets. Carol Merriam notes that until recently the poetry of Sulpicia has been perceived as a novelty and a limited imitation of the male elegists.¹¹ Kirby Flower Smith, writing in the early 20th century, acknowledged a historical Sulpicia, but he characterized her poems as sincere, emotional, spontaneous, and most problematically, amateurish.¹² Smith's view of Sulpicia's work is quite patronizing and implies that her work is less artistic and more emotional due to her sex. It is likely that Smith was influenced by the chauvinistic attitudes which existed in early scholarship and came to his conclusions partially due to Sulpicia's sex. Scholars, including Nick Lowe and Carol Merriam, have argued that due to the masculine hegemony and sexism which characterised the works of early scholars, the oddities within the poems of Sulpicia have resulted in her being viewed as a poet of inferior ability, and as lacking scholarliness.¹³ Indeed, some scholars have argued that the shorter poems are the work of an amateurish girl, while the longer poems in the body, with more mythological references, are the work of a professional male poet.¹⁴

Some recent scholars even continue to reject the idea that Sulpicia was an Augustan woman. Both Thomas Hubbard and Stefanie Kletke have argued that scholars who are interested in Sulpicia still attempt to understand the poetry using a process of biographical interpretation, which treats the poet-lover as an accurate portrayal of the poet.¹⁵ Further, Hubbard and Kletke contend that scholars find the idea of a female poet in a completely male-dominated genre too alluring to resist.¹⁶ While Hubbard and Kletke assert that scholarship on Sulpicia continues to

⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹¹ Carol Merriam, "Sulpicia: Just Another Roman Poet," *The Classical World* 100, no. 1 (2006): 11.

¹² Kirby Flower Smith, *The Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (Cincinnati and New York: American Book Company, 1914), 89.

¹³ Merriam, "Just Another Roman Poet," 11.

¹⁴ Mathilde Skoie, "The Woman," 88.

¹⁵ Thomas Hubbard, "The Invention of Sulpicia," *The Classical Journal* 100, no. 2 (2004): 177; Kletke, "Why is Sulpicia a Woman?," 626-7.

¹⁶ Hubbard, "Invention of Sulpicia," 177; Kletke, "Why is Sulpicia a Woman?," 627.

rely on the use of biographical interpretation of the poems, recent work by Carol Merriam, Judith Hallett, and Alison Keith actually all reject this approach, and instead limit their use of biographical interpretation to simply attempting to place the poet's gender and class. This degree of biographical interpretation of the elegists is common, after all, we do not attempt to claim that Ovid or Propertius were women under a male alias. Additionally, Hubbard does not take the poetic-self of the elegists into account, arguing that a female writer would not wish to reveal her love-life to her family, and therefore would not have written about it.¹⁷ Hubbard does not account for the likelihood that these poems are a fictional construction created by a woman, who created "Sulpicia" or illustrated a particular element of her personality rather than being an accurate portrayal of a historical woman's life. Rhetorically, Hubbard asks why so few lines of Sulpicia were created or remain if she was an aristocratic woman who was trained and had the ability to write skilled poetry.¹⁸ This argument is nonsensical as the artistic quality of a written document plays little significance in its chances of surviving, and the work of a female poet would have likely seemed less important alongside male love elegy in patriarchal societies. Similarly, Kletke dismantles her own argument in a number of unfortunate contradictory statements. She claims that without the misogynistic work of Otto Gruppe the possibility of female authorship would be out of the question.¹⁹ However, only a few sentences later, Kletke acknowledges scholars, predating Gruppe by a century who argued that the poems were indeed the creation of a woman.²⁰

Both Hubbard and Kletke's arguments contradict themselves by insisting that if a historical woman cannot be identified, then the poet must be male. However, both authors utilise biographical interpretations of the poetry in an attempt to disprove its female authorship by questioning the identification of figures Sulpicia mentions in her work, such as Messalla.²¹ Further, Kletke, as the most recent denier of the female authorship of the Sulpician corpus, questions the separation of the Sulpician corpus and garland arbitrarily, and provides no evidence as to why the works should be considered works of the same author other than her displeasure with Otto Gruppe.²² Kletke concludes her argument by asserting that ultimately the sex of the author of the Sulpician poems does not matter and that the poems should not be considered to be on the margins of Latin love elegy.²³ However, Kletke ultimately fails to recognize the important role Sulpicia can play in the interpretation of Roman society and literature under Augustus as the only extant female elegist.

Identifying the author of the Sulpician corpus as a woman requires a close analysis of the grammar of her work, as well as the allusions she utilizes. Allison Keith has suggested that it is impossible to know how quickly the original intended audience would have recognized the author as female.²⁴ The poems leading up to the univocal poems in 3.13-3.18, at least in the books' current arrangement, alternate from a male to a female voice, inviting the speaker to become "Sulpicia."²⁵ The grammatical gender of the poet in 3.13 may only be secured in the final line, "cum digno digna fuisse ferar" (line 16). Keith explains that Sulpicia withheld the

¹⁷ Hubbard, "Invention of Sulpicia," 177.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁹ Kletke, "Why is Sulpicia a Woman?," 646.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 647.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 650.

²⁴ Keith, "A Roman Woman Speaks," 300.

²⁵ "Sulpicia" will be used to denote the poetic self, as opposed to a historical Sulpicia.

nominative adjective “digna,” translated loosely as “a worthy woman,” till the last half of the line, choosing to place it next to the masculine ablative adjective “digno.”²⁶ Sulpicia’s gender is revealed through a very subtle grammatical instance in this line, this demonstrates a playfulness which is common amongst Roman elegiac poets. Additionally, by withholding the poet-lover’s gender until the very end of the poem Sulpicia is emphasising its importance. Withholding “Sulpicia’s” gender likely also served as a way to surprise the patriarchal Roman reader, who upon reading the excellent quality of the work would likely have assumed that it was the work of a male poet. Indeed, it seems likely that Sulpicia wished for her audience to judge her poetry by its skill and excellence before learning her gender, which may have tainted its reception, as it has done in modern scholarship.

The characteristics of the poet-lover, as well as the allusions used in the poetry, also provide an opportunity to identify the poet as female. “Sulpicia’s” love is described as *pudor*, which can be translated as a sense of what is seemly, and the poetry does indeed revolve around how seemly Sulpicia’s love, and subsequent actions, for Cerinthus is.²⁷ There is little precedent for use of *pudor* by the male Roman elegists.²⁸ A close parallel for “Sulpicia’s” love for Cerinthus appears in the character of Dido from the *Aeneid*, in her love for Aeneas.²⁹ Given Sulpicia’s connection to Mesalla, it is likely she would have encountered pieces of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, even before it was published, at private and public recitations hosted by Virgil.³⁰ Matthew Santirocco has indicated that Sulpicia’s poetry contains various framing devices, and argues that her syntax should be viewed as a rhetorical strategy.³¹ Further, he argues that the sometimes “harsh” style of Sulpicia’s poetry relates the themes present within it and the struggle a woman would have faced to speak in Roman society.³² Skoie argues that Sulpicia’s concerns with being published in 3.13 reflects yet another attempt to demonstrate how a female poet-lover might speak and act, which she argues is “within the space created between telling and not telling.”³³ If indeed these poems were created by a man it seems unlikely he would go through such effort, and have the insight required, to create this extensive and detailed female persona and poetry. Yet, some scholars continue to argue that these poems must be the creation of a man because they can not pinpoint a specific concrete female figure.

There is little precedent for the male elegiac poets performing, to such a degree, the voice of a woman. Indeed, when the male poets do speak through a female character, that character is typically the poetic *puella*. In Propertius 4.7, Propertius resurrects Cynthia from the dead, which in itself may represent her dependence on the poet for life. Despite Cynthia’s agitation and anger against the misdeeds of her poet-lover she accepts him for his faults in the end,

For now, let other girls possess you: I alone will hold you soon:
you’ll be with me, and I’ll rub my bones against yours,
enmeshed (lines 93-95).

²⁶ Keith, “A Roman Woman speaks,” 300.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Skoie, “The Woman,” 90.

³² *Ibid.*, 87.

³³ *Ibid.*, 90.

This representation of the woman, dependent on the male poet-lover for her very existence, is in stark contrast with the depiction of “Sulpicia.” In 3.16 upon learning of Cerinthus’ unfaithfulness, Sulpicia does not forgive his misconduct, instead, she highlights how she is much better than the *puella* with whom she accuses him of being unfaithful (lines 3-5). Additionally, “Sulpicia’s” lineage and status are highlighted in these poems rather than her physical appearance. Maria Wyke demonstrates the hollowness of the poetic *puellae* arguing that the women served primarily as a way to describes poetry, and interpreting Propertius’ Cynthia as a representation of Propertius’ poetic technique rather than a woman.³⁴ Sulpicia rejects this element of the elegiac poets, instead opting to create “Sulpicia” as a character independent of the poetry and using the male character, Cerinthus, as a metaphor. As such, Sulpicia is asserting her role as poet-lover and poet, an element unseen amongst female imitations in the other Roman elegists.

In some instances, Sulpicia uses her male-beloved to describe her own poetry, a reversal of the normal pattern. “Sulpicia’s” love for Cerinthus is framed using Virgil’s character of Dido and her love for Aeneas as a model to which Sulpicia regularly alludes for the purposes of her poetics. Through her alteration of the story of Dido’s love for Aeneas, Sulpicia is able to play on a familiar literary tradition while also rejecting the innuendo and rumour which characterised, and greatly harmed, Dido in the *Aeneid*. As the author of “Sulpicia’s” destiny and love affair, Sulpicia can, and indeed does, challenge Roman conceptions of sexuality by redefining the moral judgement used to scrutinize her actions. As such, Sulpicia can illustrate an image of female sexuality which is far different from that of her extant male contemporaries.³⁵ For instance, in the *Aeneid*, Dido is love sick when Venus has her son Cupid, disguised as the child Ascanius, sit in Dido’s lap thus inspiring her love for Aeneas (*Aeneid* 4.80-85). While this story is primarily echoed in Sulpicia’s 3.13, which discusses “Sulpicia’s” love for Cerinthus, there is a subtle, yet distinct, difference. “Sulpicia” uses the term *sinum* to describe her embracement of love for Cerinthus, while Dido uses the term *gremium*.³⁶ Interestingly, while *sinum* and *gremium* can be used as synonyms in some instances, both loosely translating to “lap,” another possible meaning for *sinus* is essentially a “pocket.”³⁷ It seems that Sulpicia cleverly used this opportunity to reference her poetry. She could carry her love Cerinthus, in her pocket, as her beloved was actually a metaphor for her poetry, as was common amongst the elegists.³⁸ Additionally, it was customary in this period for Romans to carry around love poetry secretly in the folds of one's garments, a tradition at which Sulpicia may also be hinting.³⁹ This subtle change in diction allowed Sulpicia to allude to a tradition which occurs in the work of the extant Roman elegists, and is a cunning display of her poetic skills. The view that Cerinthus was used as a metaphor for Sulpicia’s poetry is a relatively new development first suggested by Roessel in 1990. This delayed realization demonstrates the damaging effects patriarchal early scholarship has had on the reception and analysis of Sulpicia’s work.

It is important to understand Sulpicia’s social and class background, as well as her gender, in order to properly interpret her work. The commonly accepted identity of Sulpicia is

³⁴ Maria Wyke, “Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy,” in *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader*, ed. P.A. Miller (Routledge, 2002): 409.

³⁵ Keith, “A Roman Woman Speaks,” 301.

³⁶ David Roessel, “The Significance of the Name Cerinthus in the Poems of Sulpicia,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120 (1990): 249.

³⁷ Keith, “A Roman Woman Speaks,” 301.

³⁸ Roessel, “Cerinthus in Sulpicia,” 249.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

that she is the daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus and Valeria, the sister of Augustus' general Messalla Corvinus, who played a crucial role in the regime. Thus, it appears that Sulpicia lived the life of an elite woman in Rome, born sometime in the mid-40s or 30s BC.⁴⁰ As such, Sulpicia would have lived during the rule of the Augustan regime, which was a time of great social, political, and cultural change. Sulpicia's class plays a particularly important role in this context. Kristina Milnor has noted the paradox which existed during the Augustan era, where the ideology of the Regime stated that women should be domestic and silent beings, while also allowing some elite women the chance to exert influence in public and civic life.⁴¹ Further, Milnor argues that the constructions of women, such as Cynthia and Dido, in Augustan poetry represents the changing status and role of elite woman in Augustan society.⁴² Although the poetic-self of Sulpicia's work likely does not reflect the life of a true historical woman, it was shaped by the culture and developments in the lives of elite women in the Augustan era, from the perspective of a woman. It is important to remember that the views revealed in the work of Sulpicia should not be generalized to all women in Rome, Sulpicia's elite status clearly played a crucial role in shaping her experience and views of womanhood. Additionally, it is important to note the role Sulpicia's privileged status would have played regarding her ability to compose elegiac poetry, as well as its early reception amongst fellow elegists.

Previously, Sulpicia's work has been criticized by scholars as unrefined, unscholarly, and lacking the use of extensive allusions which characterises the work of the other elegists.⁴³ However, much like the other Roman elegists, as Sulpicia's work contains an extensive set of allusions which appear to have been overlooked by earlier scholars. David Roessel is amongst the earliest scholars to seriously analyze the extensive use of allusions in Sulpicia's work. Roessel demonstrated that the metonym used for Sulpicia's beloved, Cerinthus, was constructed as meticulously and symbolically as the names of the beloveds of the other elegists. Roessel explains that in ancient Greek tradition *Cerintus* referred to an alternative to honey, and Aristotle attributes the name to a wax-like substance which bees produce as a secondary product to honey.⁴⁴ Honey has been associated with poetics since at least Homeric times, and the term "honeyed mouth" was often employed as a compliment to an oral performance.⁴⁵ Further, the Romans wrote on tablets which had been covered in wax. Thus, the connection of Cerinthus with wax not only provides an allusion to the physical poetry of Sulpicia, but might also suggest that Cerinthus was Sulpicia's servant, and could be molded and changed to her whim, as a wax tablet might be.⁴⁶ The construction of Cerinthus by Sulpicia parallels the construction of the female beloved by her male contemporaries. Wyke has argued that the beloved in elegy should be understood as a metaphor constructed by the author which reflects their poetic programme, as well as their political interests.⁴⁷ Similarly, Keith excellently demonstrates Ovid's use of the *puella* as a metaphor for his work, in which Ovid praises the aesthetic position of his work by

⁴⁰ Keith, "A Roman Woman Speaks of Love," 297.

⁴¹ Kristina Milnor, *Gender Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴³ Merriam, "Just Another Roman Poet," 11.

⁴⁴ Roessel, "Cerinthus in Sulpicia," 243.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁷ Wyke, "Mistress and Metaphor," 405.

describing the beautiful physical qualities of the *puella*.⁴⁸ It is unreasonable to refuse this type of interpretation to Sulpicia's Cerinthus, because it reveals a great deal of poetic skill.

Judith Hallett has argued that Sulpicia also alludes to the great work of epic, the *Iliad*, in 3.13. She explains that Sulpicia's use of *fama* in the first line to mean "ill-repute," and the repeated use later in the same poem to mean "public opinion" emulates the Homeric-style ring composition, which characterises epic poetry.⁴⁹ Sulpicia further established this connection in 3.13 by referring to Venus, under the epithet of Cynthera, as dropping love in her lap, which parallels Paris being carried away from battle into Helen's bedchambers by Venus in *Iliad* 3.⁵⁰ Clearly, Sulpicia's works are crowded with allusions, as is expected in elegy, but the sexism of the early scholars made them oblivious to the extensive use of allusion in the work.

Early scholars also criticized Sulpicia's composition skills in general. Much of this criticism is a result of an inherent sexism present in the work of these scholars. For instance, Ludolph Dissen, who believed the poems were created by Tibullus, argued that they were poetic masterpieces. However, Groupe, who argued that they were authored by a woman, saw Sulpicia's work as clumsy and inept versions of elegy.⁵¹ Mathilde Skoie notes that Dissen's interpretation that the poems were written by a male elegist leads him to identify the irregularities of the poems as originalities, while Groupe identifies them as traces of inability which is attributed to the poet's femininity.⁵² Fortunately, much of the sexism which plagued early scholars has been relieved (although further work needs to be done), and modern scholars have begun to view Sulpicia's work as the product of the poetic excellence of an Augustan woman. Nick Lowe has argued that the peculiarities and style which characterize Sulpicia's work were instruments of her distinctive poetic imagination.⁵³ Skoie furthers Lowe's argument, concluding that Sulpicia's mannerisms, which have earned her much criticism, make up her "particular poetics."⁵⁴ Thus, Sulpicia's work, including all of its intentional peculiarities, presents a carefully designed female perspective on themes which are common amongst the extant Roman male elegists. Keith argues that Sulpicia adopted a multifaceted, although clearly female and feminine, poetic self through which she could represent erotic desires, satisfaction, and fears from a distinctly feminine perspective.⁵⁵

Sulpicia's work reflects many of the themes present in the work of the other elegists. *Nequitia*, "badness," is a regular feature of the Roman elegiac poets.⁵⁶ Although Sulpicia's work utilizes the theme of *nequitia* this is relatively unacknowledged. In 3.13 Sulpicia openly declares her *nequitia*: "nay, I love my fault, and loathe to wear a mask for rumour" (lines 8-9) This declaration of the poet-lover's *nequitia* reads quite similarly to Ovid's in *Amores* 2.1, in which he declares:

⁴⁸ Allison Keith, "Corpus Eroticum: Elegiac Poetics and Elegiac Puellae in Ovid's *Amores*," *The Classical World* 88, no. 1 (1994): 39.

⁴⁹ Judith P. Hallett, "Sulpicia and her Fama: An Intertextual Approach to Recovering her Latin Literary Image," *The Classical World* 100, no. 1 (2006): 38.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Skoie, *Reading Sulpicia*, 163.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 164.

⁵³ Lowe, "Sulpicia's Syntax," 205.

⁵⁴ Skoie, "The Woman," 90.

⁵⁵ Keith, "A Roman Woman Speaks of Love," 307.

⁵⁶ Allison Sharrock, "The *poeta-amator*, *nequitia*, and *recusatio*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, ed. Thea Thorson (Cambridge and New York: American Book Company, 2013), 151.

A second batch of verses by that naughty provincial poet,
 Naso, the chronicler of his own
 Wanton frivolities (lines 1-3).

Allison Sharrock has argued that all the extant male Roman elegists wear their *nequitia* as a badge of honour and use it as a positive aesthetic choice.⁵⁷ Further, she explains that the poets express a knowledge that their act is reprehensible, but they enjoy it anyway.⁵⁸ However, while Ovid's *Amores* and Propertius' work are held in high regard for their use of the theme, Sulpicia is seldom mentioned or acknowledged for her use of the literary tactic. In fact, in Sharrock's analysis of the use of *nequitia* in the elegists, she details its use by Ovid, Tibullus, Propertius, and even briefly Gallus, but not Sulpicia.⁵⁹ It is astonishing that Sharrock would mention Gallus, whose extant poetry consists of a scarce ten lines, yet neglect the work of Sulpicia.⁶⁰ It seems likely that the lack of acknowledgment of Sulpicia's use of *nequitia*, and indeed her work as a whole, may stem from the early scholarship which believed her work to be amateurish, and as such not worthy of serious literary analysis. Nevertheless, Sulpicia's work necessitates an approach similar to that applied to the male elegists to properly appreciate her literary skill.

Sulpicia skillfully balances a liminal position between beloved and lover; object and subject. In several instances of her poetry, "Sulpicia" herself appears to be playing the role of the poetic *puella*. Perhaps the most noticeable instance of Sulpicia appearing as the *puella* occurs in 3.13, where she is overly concerned with the loss of her *fama*,⁶¹ or reputation:

At last love has come: and the rumour that I have
 concealed it would shame me more than disclosure (lines 1-4)

This concern with her reputation is not characteristic of the extant male elegiac poets. For example, Catullus 5 suggests that gossip about his reputation should be valued at: "no more than a farthing!" (line 3). Rather, it appears that Sulpicia's model for the concern regarding *fama* is Dido. In Virgil's *Aeneid*, the female lover, Dido, is also concerned with her *fama* which eventually leads to her downfall:

Rumor at once sweeps through Libya's great cities,
 Rumour, the swiftest of evils. She thrives on speed
 And gains power as she goes (lines 4.173-4.177).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 165.

⁶⁰ Richard Whittaker, "Apropos of the New Gallus Fragment," *Acta Classica* 24 (1981): 87-88.

⁶¹ Skoie, "The Woman," 92.

In addition to this concern for her *fama*, Dido also shares a number of elements of an elegiac *puella*, including lack of self-control. However, while Dido is a model for “Sulpicia,” Sulpicia skillfully adapts the story, altering it to create an intricate image of the female poet-lover.

Sulpicia ultimately rejects the fate of Dido and takes a more active role in her relationship with her beloved, asserting her status as the poet-lover rather than the *puella*. Poem 3.16 is the culmination of Sulpicia’s rejection of the image of the poetic *puella*. In this poem, she highlights her aristocratic lineage and family name,

For thee toga and strumpet loaded with wool-basket may be
worthier of thy preference than Sulpicia, Servius’ daughter (lines 4-6).

By bestowing an aristocratic family name upon herself, “Sulpicia” is separating herself from the low-born *puellae*.⁶² Additionally, the family which “Sulpicia” names, the *gens Sulpicia* is a family with aristocratic roots, so her privileged status as an elite woman must be accounted for when examining the authority dynamics with Cerinthus in her love-affair.⁶³ While “Sulpicia” does play the role of the *domina* in most of the corpus, she does not appear to completely control Cerinthus. Sulpicia’s lack of control over Cerinthus is best displayed in 3.16, where he is infatuated with Sulpicia’s social inferior:

this is the greatest cause of pain, that I may
yield my place to an ignoble rival (lines 5-6).

So, while Sulpicia refuses the characterization of the *puella*, she is also not in control of her beloved and is involved in a careful balancing act between the *puella* and the *domina* throughout her corpus. This carefully established liminality demonstrates Sulpicia’s skill, and plays into the larger theme of liminality within Roman elegy. Trevor Fear argues that the Roman elegiac poets carefully balance their identity and role between youth and adulthood, which justifies their outrageous acts.⁶⁴ Sulpicia adopts this parallel conflict and molds it to better reflect the position of a female poet-lover; using it to demonstrate her balance between the role of the *puella*, how a woman should act in Roman elegy, and the poet-lover, an improper role for a Roman woman.

Sulpicia also uses the theme of disease in her work, which is common amongst the love elegists. In 3.17 Sulpicia writes,

Cerinthus, has thou any tender thought for thine
own girl, now that fever racks her feeble frame? Ah,
I would not pray to triumph over the drear disease if I

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Trevor Fear, “Propertian Closure: The Elegiac Inscription of the Liminal Male and Ideological Contestation in Augustan Rome,” in *Gendered Dynamics in Latin Love Elegy* (John Hopkins, 2005), 13-14.

thought that thou wouldst wish to (lines 1-4)

This poem draws a number of parallels with Catullus 76, where Catullus describes his love as a plague,

pluck out of me this destruction, this plague,
 which, creeping torpor-like into my innermost being
 has emptied my heart of joy (lines 20-21).

Propertius provides a scene which is even more comparable, describing his dedication to his mistress in her ill-health,

were these my prayers for your health
 when the Stygian waters were already around your head,
 and we, your friends, stood circling your bed, crying?
 This man, by god, where was he then, you faithless bitch? (2.9.25-8)

Clearly, Sulpicia is playing with a literary tradition, which was common amongst the elegiac poets.⁶⁵ Further, Sulpicia's 3.17 can perhaps be interpreted as a response to, or continuation of, Propertius' work. Sulpicia, operating within Messalla's literary circle, likely would have been exposed to the poetry of the other elegists, including Propertius. The new lover of the beloved in Propertius' poem could perhaps even be interpreted as Cerinthus, as Propertius claims the new lover will be absent during the sickness of the female character, and Sulpicia is complaining about her absentee beloved in her sickness. This similarity is far from an isolated occurrence and many others exist throughout the corpus of Sulpicia's writings, however, Sulpicia's poetry lacks recognition for its treatment of the illness theme and its allusion to the works of the other elegists.

Sulpicia's travel poems also contain a number of parallels to the other elegists. In particular, Sulpicia's 3.14 and 3.15 are very similar to Propertius' 1.8a and 1.8b, as both establish and immediately resolve a similar issue.⁶⁶ In 1.8a Propertius decries the departure of his beloved and pleads with her to stay. Suddenly, in 1.8b Propertius' beloved decides to remain with him and he is celebrating his success. Similarly, Sulpicia complains that she will be away from her beloved in 3.14, and in 3.15 the situation has been resolved and Sulpicia celebrates. Additionally, in both Sulpicia's and Propertius' work the joy of having their beloveds near them is short lived. In 3.16 Sulpicia discovers that Cerinthus has been unfaithful to her with someone of a lower social status than her. In parallel, Propertius denounces the effects love has on the poet-lover in the very next poem, 1.9 "this is but the first spark of suffering to come." Santirocco notes that most elegiac poetry does follow the trend of a repeating cycle of crisis then joy; the lover never remains happy for long. Sulpicia's example of this trend is executed excellently, yet

⁶⁵ Skoie, "The Woman," 89.

⁶⁶ Matthew Santirocco, "Sulpicia Reconsidered," *The Classical Journal* 74, no. 3 (1979): 232-3.

her poetry continues to receive little scholarship and is viewed as an accessory to the canonical Roman elegists.

The poetry of Sulpicia has unjustly been classified as inferior by sexist scholars working in a patriarchal society. While some recent scholarship has begun to appreciate the poetics of the only extant female Roman elegist, further work needs to be completed in order to remove the stigma from Sulpicia's work. The lack of scholarly attention to her technique and use of common literary strategies shows that her poetry is still viewed as an accessory to the traditional canonical Roman elegists. If scholars were to begin to study Sulpicia's poetry with the same attention paid to the extant male Roman elegists, her work may provide valuable insight into the changing lifestyles and attitudes of elite women in Roman society under Augustan ideology. Given Sulpicia's extensive allusions, scholarliness and engagement with the work of other elegists, it seems the only explanation as to why she has been viewed as sub-par by scholars is her sex. As such, Sulpicia's work deserves further study analyzing its literary technique, and in its reflection of the ideology of the Augustan regime, particularly as it pertains to views of sex and gender roles.

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