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The Poems of Sulpicia from the Corpus Tibullianum
By Derek Mong

3.13

Finally my love responds, and with an email
more scandalous to hide than to save or to expose.
It's true, once my Muses dialed into Cytherea
she replied and plugged this stud into my laptop.
Oh Venus, you pay out your promises so I can
post my joys for those who lack their own.
And yet I hardly trust these message boards or blogs
lest someone read them before my lover does.
Still, it's a pleasant enough faux pas. Grief comes
when we make our reputations into masks.
I've found my dignity with a distinguished man.

3.14

Oh, my dreadful birthday arrives, and I must
spend it, without Cerinthus, in the Amish countryside.
Really, what is sweeter than the city? Why would barns
be fit for girls? And this one near a freezing river!
Already uncle Messalla, you've prayed for me too eagerly
as your roads run with spring's mud and travel
grows taxing. If removed from Rome I relinquish
my soul and DSL. Why haven't I the slightest choice?

3.15

Guess what? They've scratched that journey
from my calendar! Your lover spends her birthday
in Rome. So let us begin this day hand in hand:
one city girl who joins her unsuspecting beau.

3.16

It's really best you give such leeway
to our love, or else I might lose myself and fall
for you. Is she, this tramp who spins her online yarns,
lovelier than Sulpicia, the daughter of Servius?
Daddy worries for us both. You know his greatest fear?
That I might lose you to a shadow's bed.

3.17

Cerinthus, do you ache for your fiancé
now that one fever plagues my limbs –
another my CPU? I don't expect to overcome
any virus on my own. Perhaps this is your will.
Who would gain then if I beat the bug,
when you bear disaster with an easy heart?

3.18

Oh let me not be to you, bright boy,
that fiery lover I seemed just days before.
If my stupid youthful ways have brought
you pain, I should confess that I was,
in vain, trying to disguise my love—
when I signed off on you last night.

A note on Sulpicia:

The poems of Sulpicia come down to us in the *Corpus Tibullianum*, a text that mostly consists of Tibullus's love elegies. However, the third book contains various other elegists, including an unknown poet named Lygdamus and the only surviving work from a female writer working in classical Latin: Sulpicia. These six elegies, addressed to her lover Cerinthus, comprise her entire body of work. Whether she wrote other poems remains beyond the six translated here remains a mystery.

Little is known about Sulpicia herself. As the daughter of the jurist Servius and the niece of Messalla, she likely enjoyed a privileged life among the Roman upper-crust. And yet her background does not prevent her from publicly writing about her lover, something of a taboo.

The poems themselves remain short (none longer than ten lines) and elegiac by nature and meter. Thus they provide the clearest link between early epigram writing and the generation of Latin elegists: (Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid). It is Sulpicia, however, who inverts the gender roles made famous by these male poets. She becomes the betrayed lover, the *servitium amoris* (slave of love), and we can easily picture her the equal to Ovid's

Corinna or Catullus's Lesbia. In past criticism, these poems have been dismissed as the "spontaneous effusions of an artless young girl" (Miller 24). A more careful reading of the poem argues otherwise.

A note on the translation:

As is obvious from my first line, the following translation does not pretend to be a literal representation of the Latin. I have in fact taken liberties, though less with the tenor and tone of Sulpicia's verse, than the actual language, the difficult syntax especially. The most glaring modifications are the anachronisms: laptop for *sinum* (folds, usually the folds in a toga, i.e. lap), message boards and blogs for *tabellis* (wax writing tablets), and "tramp who spins her online yarns" for *pressumque quasillo/scortum* (prostitute spinning wool). My objective here was 1) to update Sulpicia's woes for a 21st century audience, and 2) to illustrate a likeness between the "temporary" writing of today and similar writing of the Romans. This path also led towards the issue of public vs. private texts, publication, and correspondence, all concerns relevant to Sulpicia.

Sulpicia information and Latin text found in: Miller, Paul Allen, ed. Latin Erotic Elegy. New York: Routledge, 2002.