

SULPICIA

(late 1st century BC, wrote in Latin)

Introduction

A collection of eighteen short and medium length Latin poems survives, attached in medieval manuscripts to the collected works of the love elegist Albius Tibullus (ca. 55–19 BC). These poems, all in elegiac couplets, seem to come from the circle of literary friends and relations surrounding Tibullus' patron, the prominent statesman and general Messalla (M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus, 64 BC–AD 8). Among them are the six short poems translated here, a rare example of the survival of Latin poetry composed by a woman. The speaker says she is named Sulpicia, daughter of Servius; to her lover she gives the name Cerinthus, a Greek pseudonym of the type normally used by male Latin love poets to camouflage the identity of the beloved. By contrast she is quite forthcoming about herself. In the space of forty lines she informs us that she is young (3.18.3), the daughter of a man named Servius (3.16.4), with property in Etruria (3.14.4), and that a Messalla is her kinsman and, in some manner, guardian (3.14.5–6). This Servius has been identified as a son of Cicero's friend Servius Sulpicius Rufus, who married Messalla's sister Valeria, which would make Sulpicia herself a niece of Messalla. She would therefore count as a member of the highest Roman nobility of the Augustan period.

Elegies

1 **A Love That Should Be Talked About** (*Corpus Tibullianum* 3.13)

Love has come (at last!)—such a love that to hide it out of shame
rather than expose it to someone would bring
more shame upon me. In my poetry I begged Venus to bring him,
and she did, set him right down in my lap.

Venus has done as she promised: if someone is said not to have
joys of her own, she can tell of *my* joys.

I use sealed tablets for my messages to him, for fear that someone else
might read them first—but I'd rather not.

I'm happy in my disobedience. Putting on a false front to avoid
the rumors is tiresome. People would say we're perfect.

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2 A Rotten Birthday in the Country (3.14)

My birthday is coming, but I hate it. I'll have to spend it in the stupid countryside, and without my love Cerinthus.
 What is more delicious than being in Rome? A country villa's no place for a girl, nor rural Arretium with its freezing streams.
 Messala, you're my kin, but please stop. You are too attentive to my needs.
 Your trips all too often come at a very bad time.
 When I leave here, abducted, I leave my mind and heart behind,
 all because you won't let me have my way.

3 An Unexpected Surprise (3.15)

Have you heard? That dreary trip has been lifted off your girl's mind,
 canceled. Now I can spend my birthday in Rome.
 Let's celebrate the day together with all our friends, a day that
 arrives for you as such a delightful surprise.

4 A Cheating Lover (3.16)

Thank you for allowing yourself to be completely unconcerned for me.
 This way, I won't suddenly make an awful fool of myself.
 Go ahead, think more about that cheap toga-wearing whore,¹ wool-basket
 in tow, than about Sulpicia, the daughter of Servius.
 There are people who care about me. And their main cause for worry
 is that I not end up with a worthless man like you.

5 A Hard-Hearted Lover (3.17)

Cerinthus, do you care at all for your girl? Any devotion to me,
 now that fever torments and wears out my body?
 Ah! I wouldn't want to be cured of this grim affliction
 if I didn't think *you* desired it, too.
 But what good does it do me to overcome my malady, if you
 can look upon my sufferings with a cold heart?

6 A Lover's Mistake (3.18)

My light, I swear: May I no longer be the object of your fiery love
 (as I seem to have been a few days ago)

1. Female prostitutes were the only Roman women who wore the toga, a formal garment otherwise only permitted to male citizens.

if I have ever done *anything* as foolish in my whole foolish youth,
anything I have regretted half as much,
as when I left you alone last night in a misguided attempt
to conceal from others my passion for you.