

SULPICIA: SIX POEMS

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Introduction: Many women, we know, wrote poetry in ancient Rome. The works of only one have survived. These six poems by Sulpicia, the niece of the distinguished statesman and patron of letters Valerius Messalla Corvinus, allow us to hear an aristocratic female voice from the late first century B.C. and the Augustan milieu of Horace and Vergil. Sulpicia's work has been handed down as part of the Corpus Tibullianum, a collection of poems by Tibullus and other poets affiliated with Messalla.

1.

At last. It's come. Love,
 the kind that veiling
 will give me reputation more
 than showing my soul naked to someone.
 I prayed to Aphrodite in Latin, in poems;
 she brought him, smuggled him
 into my bosom.
 Venus has kept her promises:
 let her tell the story of my happiness,
 in case some woman will be said
 not to have had her share.
 I would not want to trust
 anything to tablets, signed and sealed,
 so no one reads me
 before my love--
 but indiscretion has its charms;
 it's boring
 to fit one's face to reputation.
 May I be said to be
 a worthy lover for a worthy love.

2.

Birthday's here and I hate it--
 of all the days to be spent in gloom
 out in the dreary country
 without Cerinthus.
 What is sweeter than the city?
 Is a house in the country
 on the banks of that frigid stream in Arretine country,
 any place for a girl?
 Now Uncle Messalla, do take a rest--
 you've always looked after me too well.
 There are times, you know, when travel's

a bad idea.
 I'VE BEEN KIDNAPPED I'VE LEFT BEHIND
 MY MIND MY FEELING VIOLENCE
 DOESN'T LET ME BE MY OWN
 MISTRESS.

3.

You know the dreary trip contemplated for a girl?
 Now I can be at Rome for your birthday.
 May that day be celebrated by us all,
 which now comes, perchance, as no surprise to you.

4.

Thank you for taking such pains over me,
 for keeping me from making a fool of myself.
 I do hope you enjoy the bimbo.
 Her flashy clothes
 do cast a subtly shabby light on
 SVLPICIA SERVI FILIA.
 (They are a little worried about me,
 afraid I might trip up,
 marry a nobody.)

5.

Do you think kindly of your girl, Cerinthus,
 now that a fever attacks my limbs?
 I wouldn't wish to get well except on one condition:
 that I could think you wished it too.
 But what would be the good in getting well, if you
 can bear my sickness with unflustered heart?

6.

May I never be, o dawn of my life, as warm a care to you
 as I seem to have been a few days ago,
 if --fool that I am-- I've done anything in all my short life
 that I might admit to regretting more
 than leaving you alone last night--
 passionate only to hide my passion.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

I.5 Aphrodite in Latin: in her Latin, Sulpicia juxtaposes Cytherea, a Greek epithet for Aphrodite, with the Camenae, the Italian and Roman goddesses of song and poetry, counterparts of the Muses.

I.8 Venus: the Roman goddess of erotic love. Her Greek counterpart is Aphrodite (I.5).

I.13 tablets: wooden tablets coated in wax were the usual material for writing letters, drafts, and other more or less ephemeral documents.

II.4 Cerinthus: like most Roman poets, Sulpicia disguises her lover with a pseudonym. The identity of "Cerinthus" is unknown; he has been identified, without much reason, as the "Cornutus" mentioned elsewhere in the Corpus Tibullianum.

II.10: Uncle Messalla: Valerius Messalla Corvinus (64 B.C. - A.D. 8), a prominent soldier, orator, statesman, and patron of the arts.

IV.6: SVLPICIA SERVI FILIA: "Sulpicia, the daughter of Servius;" Sulpicia here refers to herself in the formal, public style of an aristocratic inscription.

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