

Embracing Ambiguity of Authorship in the Sulpicia Poems

Previous efforts to determine the sex of the author of the Sulpicia poems in the *Corpus Tibullianum* have attempted to resolve its ambiguity (Hubbard, 2005; Keith, 2006; et al.). These efforts ignore the fact that Roman readers also would have had trouble determining the sex of the actual author. Rather than being an obstacle to their understanding, ambiguity of authorship is a vital element of these poems. As Brian Breed observes, elegy is “the genre most inclined to experiment with ways of conveying the reality of women” within Roman poetry (Breed, 2003). These poems take this experimentation into the level of authorship.

Recent scholarship has focused most of its attention on [Tibullus] 3.13-18, largely ignoring the five preceding poems, which also treat Sulpicia (“Sulpicia’s Garland”). In treating the “Sulpicia poems,” I consider all of the poems in Book 3 of Tibullus that are concerned with Sulpicia, including the “Garland.” An earlier poem in the second book of Tibullus (2.3) also serves the purposes of the later poems, but this poem is unambiguously written by Tibullus.

In order to conceptualize how the ambiguity of authorship in the Sulpicia poems operates, I use the model that Peter J. Rabinowitz created in his seminal article “Truth in Fiction.” In this model, Rabinowitz argues that there are four audiences of every fictional work. First, there is the actual audience. This audience is the physical reader with the book on her knee, which is the only audience that is not controlled by the author. Second, there is the authorial audience. This is the hypothetical audience that has certain knowledge or beliefs which allow it to understand the author’s artistic choices. Third, there is the narrative audience. This audience reads the work of fiction as if it were a real event. Finally, there is the ideal narrative audience. This audience takes what the narrator says at face value.

The unavoidable ambiguity of the authorship of Sulpicia's poems creates tension between the authorial audience and the narrative audience: the authorial audience questions whether this is a real woman's perspective, while the narrative audience reads the work as a collection of love poems written by a woman to her lover. The possibility of two authorial audiences—one which believes the author is actually Sulpicia and one which does not—creates confusion in the actual audience, who must decide which authorial audience to adopt. Conflict of identity is felt, rather than observed, by the reader.

The tension between the two different authorial audiences exists on both the structural and the textual level. Structurally, the placement of the entire series of poems in the third book of Tibullus immediately calls their actual authorship into question, and would have for a Roman audience as well. Within the "Garland of Sulpicia," the alternation between first and third person from poem to poem is purposeful and intended to introduce ambiguity of authorship into the following six love poems. Textually, specific phrases, such as "*Servi filia Sulpicia*" ([Tibullus] 3.16), and allusions, such as that of Vertumnus ([Tibullus] 3.13), weave the ambiguity of authorship into the fabric of the poems.

It is important to note that in calling the ambiguity of the authorship of these poems to the forefront, I am not implicitly arguing that Sulpicia was not their author. There is no reason to believe that Sulpicia would have been unable, or unwilling, to create doubt among readers of her poems, especially in consideration that doubt is the very purpose of these poems.

The sex of the author of the Sulpicia poems is certainly a topic worthy of consideration: the artifice that has been created takes on different meanings depending on the gender of its true author. If the sex of the author did not matter, the ambiguity would not be significant. But even if Sulpicia could be conclusively determined to be female, these poems do not give us the

unfiltered perspective of Roman women. This is a highly artificial work, in which the author very purposefully manipulates the reactions of her audiences. One of the great successes of this series of poems is that, despite the artifice, it does not lose its sense of emotional authenticity.

Bibliography

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