

## Realism and Reality: The Elegiac Epistolography of Sulpicia

For such a small poetic corpus, the works of Sulpicia have given scholars immense windows into the authorial process of Roman Elegy. Her poems, numbered in this paper as [Tibullus] 3.13- 3.18, were once thought to belong to Tibullus himself, or to other anonymous male authors, but can now safely be attributed to Sulpicia, a Roman woman writing in the 20s BCE, the niece and possible ward of Messalla (Lowe 1988; Keith 2006). Discussions about the sincerity of Roman elegy, or the realistic literary effects taking place in potentially fictional contexts, gain great ground when Sulpicia is considered among the ranks of the other Roman elegists: Catullus, Gallus, Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid.

The task of this paper will be to do just that, to view Sulpicia as an innovator of the realism the Roman elegiac genre is capable of. I build on the concept that Sulpicia forgoes more obvious mythological and literary references, abundant in the male elegists, in favor of a more embodied realism (Milnor 2002). This realism, as I argue, comes in large part from Sulpicia's use of common epistolary tropes: birthday occasions and bouts of illness, as well as vocabulary of the physical act of sending correspondence. By borrowing these tropes from prose letters, Sulpicia emphasizes the realist aspect of her poetry. We can also read this apparent blending of genres to reveal a Roman awareness of the constructed and intentional nature of the epistolary genre that Sulpicia references.

Realism and reality are topics that have fascinated readers of elegy and epistles since ancient times; Apuleius famously unveiled the "real" names of elegiac mistresses (*Apologia* 10). Scholars have compared elegy's authentic effect to oratory (Allen 1950), and have argued that elegy relies upon specific rhetorical moves to construct their sincerity (Wyke 1989; Kennedy 1993; Sharrock 2000). Kristina Milnor connects Sulpicia's work with Ovid's exilic epistolary

corpus, arguing that each author promises the reality of their poetry by relating it to the physical existence of their own bodies (Milnor 2002).

I seek to build on this argument, and I suggest that it is not only the focus on the body, but specifically the inclusion of elements from epistolary correspondence that ground these poems so realistically. In this paper, I hope to also spark an interest in examining the close relationship that exists between elegiac poetry and letters, wherein each genre reflects and enriches the other in ways that have not yet been fully explored.

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