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The Sulpicia Cycle as Epithalamic Dedication

I argue that the short cycle of poems attributed to the teenage niece of Messalla ([Tibullus] 4.7-4.12) are the work of another in the persona of Sulpicia, imitating the style and emotions one might expect in a teenage girl. The fictionality of the persona may be implied by 4.7.5-8. A similar thesis has recently been maintained by Holzberg (*CJ* 1998-99), who does not, however, believe that Messalla actually had a niece of that name. A more plausible scenario is that this short elegiac cycle is a kind of epithalamic dedication on the occasion of Sulpicia's wedding, perhaps even written by Tibullus himself. As such, the poems would constitute an elegiac equivalent of Fescennine verses, where ribald allusions to sex or to possible infidelity (as in 4.10; cf. the epithalamic Catullus 61.97-101, 119-46, 214-23) are common. What would be embarrassing if the poems were authentic and autobiographical becomes altogether acceptable in a Fescennine context. Several considerations associate these poems with marriage. Sulpicia's beloved Cerinthus is probably to be identified with the Cornutus to whom Tib. 2.2 is addressed (the names have the same syllabic quantities and same sequence of consonants). 2.2 is a birthday poem (thus like 4.8 and 4.9, as well as 4.5 and 4.6 of the *Garland of Sulpicia*) and seems to predict Cornutus' impending marriage; it hardly seems plausible that so slight an occasional poem would have been included in Book II of Tibullus unless Cornutus were someone of importance to Messalla. Moreover, this poem is closely imitated in 4.2, the programmatic opening poem of the *Garland* (especially 4.2.17-20 = 2.2.3-4, 15-16); these imitations gain resonance if 4.2 is in fact celebrating the same marriage predicted in 2.2. Indeed, the Kalends of March is significant as the day Sulpicia is cultivated (4.2.1) because it is the Matronalia, the day when husbands pray for the health of their wives and offer them presents. The *Garland* (poems 4.2-4.6) was probably meant as just such an anniversary present, paralleling the earlier wedding gift of the Sulpicia poems (4.7-4.12). If the earlier Sulpicia collection were written by someone other than Sulpicia, the imitation of Sulpicia's voice by the *Garland* poet in 4.3 and 4.5 becomes much easier to understand; Parker's theory that these two poems were also actually the work of Sulpicia can be refuted on several grounds.

Finally, we may find confirmation of these poems being produced in connection with a marriage in the work of the "other Sulpicia," a contemporary of Martial (10.35, 10.38) who wrote graphic erotic poetry specifically for married couples. She is also alluded to in Ausonius' *Cento Nuptialis* and Sidonius Apollonaris 9.261-62 (an epithalamium). That the only two Roman poetesses we know should both be named "Sulpicia" is too much of a coincidence; it must be that the earlier Sulpicia's name was appropriated by the latter, who saw the earlier Sulpicia's poetry as a precedent for her (or his) work. If Sulpicia was indeed married to Cerinthus (= Cornutus), the parallel to the later Sulpicia's relation to Calenus would work better. "Sulpicia" becomes a name to appropriate for a certain genre of poetry, like "Theognis" or "Homer" several centuries earlier.