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## SCHOLIA

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### THE OTHER SULPICIA

Very little poetry written by Roman women survives. The Sulpicia of the Tibullan corpus<sup>1</sup> (circa 25 B.C.) is the only female Roman poet of whose work anything remains. Strangely enough, another poetess, also named Sulpicia, apparently lived and wrote during the reign of Domitian, ca. A.D. 90. Scholarship has, for the most part, neglected her. She appears, as one might expect, in Henry Bardon's work, *La Littérature latine inconnue*.<sup>2</sup> This Sulpicia also warrants a paragraph in Schanz-Hosius.<sup>3</sup> G. Thiele's article, "Die Poesie unter Domitian",<sup>4</sup> begins with a section entitled "Das Sulpicia-Gedichte", but concentrates upon a 70 line "satire" on the expulsion of the philosophers from Rome by Domitian, a work long thought to be by our second Sulpicia. The satire was included in Otto Jahn's edition of the Roman satirists over her name,<sup>5</sup> but by the time the 4th edition appeared in 1911 (edited by Friederich Leo), doubts had arisen about Sulpicia's authorship.

Sulpiciae quae fertur saturam editam a Georgio Merula Alexandrino, quamquam verbis examinatis sententisque ac nominibus mihi persuasi compositam esse ab aliquo Caecio incondite balbeque iocato nec potuisse inesse in ullo codice vetusto, aliud igitur carmen fuisse id quod paulo ante reperitum esse in Bobiensi recepti, praesertim cum primus eam Iahnus recensuit ex artis formula.<sup>6</sup>

It is now generally agreed by scholars such as U. Knoche<sup>7</sup>, M. Coffey,<sup>8</sup> and Bardon that the satire dates from about the 4th century A.D. H. Fuchs<sup>9</sup> suggests the 5th century A.D. at the earliest. In any case, the piece is clearly not the work of the Sulpicia in question, and so must be discounted in our discussion.

The principal witness to the existence and the poems of the "other Sulpicia" is Martial, who mentions her in 10.35, and uses her *persona* in 10.38, when addressing her husband, Calenus. Ausonius also mentions the "other Sulpicia" in his *Cento Nuptialis*, when defending himself against the

<sup>1</sup> Tibullus 3.13-18.

<sup>2</sup> *La Littérature latine inconnue* vol. 1, *L'Époque républicaine* (Paris 1952) and vol. II, *L'Époque impériale* (Paris 1956).

<sup>3</sup> M. Schanz and C. Hosius, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur* (Munich 1935) II.560 *et sq.*

<sup>4</sup> G. Thiele, "Die Poesie unter Domitian," *Hermes* 51 (1916) 233-60.

<sup>5</sup> A. Persii Flacci, *D. Junii Iuvenalis, Sulpiciae Saturae*, ed. Otto Jahn (Berlin 1868).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 4th ed., ed. F. Leo (Berlin 1910).

<sup>7</sup> *Roman Satire*, trans. E. S. Ramage (Indiana 1975).

<sup>8</sup> *Roman Satire* (London 1976).

<sup>9</sup> "Discordia Concors," in *Festschrift für Edgar Benjourn* (Stuttgart 1968) 32-47.

charge of immorality, since some of his poetry is tinged with licentiousness. Ausonius cites a number of other writers whose written works might not be considered morally acceptable, but whose personal lives are beyond reproach: *ne fortasse mores meos spectent de carmina*. In a list that includes Plato (the *Symposium*), Pliny, and even Cicero, Ausonius says *meminerint autem, quippe eruditi . . . prurire opusculum Sulpiciae, frontem capere*. The blatant sexuality, almost obscenity<sup>10</sup> which Ausonius attributes to Sulpicia's verses may well be exaggerated to give greater weight to Ausonius' own defence, since Martial's *testimonia* never suggest that Sulpicia's poems were other than proper and perfect examples of fidelity. As Bardon says, "son affection pour Calenus permet de penser qu'elle constituait le sujet essentiel de sa poésie."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the whole point of Martial 10.35 is that Sulpicia's poems should be read by young people who wish to live correctly and faithfully. Martial tells us that Sulpicia in her poems *castos docet et probos amores* (10.35.8), and that she does not write of such people as Byblis, *vetito quae fratris amore/arsit et esr laqueo fortiter ulta nefas*<sup>12</sup>, or Scylla, whose passion caused the downfall of her father's city.<sup>13</sup> Martial compares Sulpicia to Egeria, a water goddess who communed with the Camenae and was wife of Numa Pompilius.<sup>14</sup>

Next, Martial compares Sulpicia favourably to Sappho, both as regards her purity and her learning: *hac condiscipula vel hac magistra / esses doctior et pudica, Sappho* (10.35.15-16), a reminiscence of the *doctae puellae* of Propertius and Ovid. Bardon<sup>15</sup> believes that Martial means that her "talent serait comparable à celui de Sappho." Moreover, Martial imagines that Sulpicia is more attractive than Sappho: *sed tecum pariter simulque visam / durus Sulpiciam Phaon amaret* (10.35.17-8). Phaon the ferryman, for love of whom Sappho was supposed to have thrown herself from the cliff of Leucates,<sup>16</sup> would, given the choice, prefer Sulpicia to the Lesbian poet. But such a wish would be vain, for (returning to the Lesbian poet. But encumbrance of Sulpicia and her work) Sulpicia is *univira*: completely devoted to her husband Calenus (10.35.19-21):

... namque ea nec Tonantis uxor  
nec Bacchi nec Apollinis puella  
erepta sibi viveret Caleno.

Martial's expression of Sulpicia's fidelity may recall Catullus' report of Lesbia's protestations: *Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle / quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat*,<sup>17</sup> but Catullus is only quoting Lesbia. He has no faith in her fidelity, while Martial is expressing his own opinion of Sulpicia's loyalty to Calenus.

<sup>10</sup> This is the meaning of *prurire* in the other contexts in which we find it, such as Catullus 16.9 and 88.2, and Martial 5.78.27, 9.90.8 and 11.81.4.

<sup>11</sup> *La Littérature latine inconnue* II, 227-8.

<sup>12</sup> Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* I.283-4, in the 1961 Oxford text of E. J. Kenney.

<sup>13</sup> This is that same Scylla whose story is told in the *Ciris*. She should not be confused with the sea monster of *Od.* 12.

<sup>14</sup> According to Ovid, *Fasti* 3.275-6: *Egeria est quae praebet aquas, dea grata Camenis: / illa Numae coniunx consiliumque fuit*.

<sup>15</sup> *La Littérature latine inconnue* II, 228.

<sup>16</sup> According to the *Suda*, S108 (iv. 323 Adler), and Ovid, *Her.* 15.

<sup>17</sup> Catullus 70.1-2, the 1958 Oxford text of R. A. B. Mynors.

Epigram 10.38, in which Martial uses Sulpicia's own poetic voice, makes no reference to the prurience which Ausonius ascribes to her poetry. Rather, it is a celebration of a long term association, every day and hour of which is *notata . . . / caris litoris Indici lapillis* (10.38.4-5). Sulpicia and Calenus mark the nights and days of their fifteen years not with plain white stones, but with precious stones from India. They are not simply happy, but joyous and glorious.

It is perhaps due to references to her nights spent with Calenus that Ausonius feels that Sulpicia's poems are immoral, but since the nights in question are in the context of a legal marriage, it seems unlikely that such could be the basis of Ausonius' charges.

The poem ends with the assertion that Calenus would prefer to spend even one of his days with Sulpicia than live to be four times the age of Nestor (*Pylam quater senectam*, 10.38.14). Apparently Calenus' fidelity and his happiness in their association are as great as Sulpicia's own.

Such are our only witnesses to the writings of the "other Sulpicia". Her poems, if not precisely "chaste", were at the very least faithful expressions of joy in a legal marriage. Her reputation for a prurient style in poetry coupled with a pure style of living is left as a matter of speculation.

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