

SULPICIA AMERICANA:
A READING OF SULPICIA IN THE
COMMENTARY BY K. F. SMITH (1913)¹

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How to read the women of Roman elegy has been the subject of much debate during the last 30 years.² In particular, what happens when a feminine voice enters this “distinctively male genre”? Would she perhaps answer like Dorothy Parker’s Lesbia who refuses to be “but a tune” on the poet’s “pipe” and confesses that she “always hated birds”?

It’s just the same—quarrel or a kiss
Is but a tune to play on his pipe.
He’s always hymning that or wailing this;
Myself, I much prefer the business type.

That thing he wrote, the time the sparrow died—
(Oh, most unpleasant—gloomy, tedious words!)
I called it sweet, and made believe I cried;
The stupid fool! I’ve always hated birds . . .³

1 The author would like to thank Jon Haarberg (University of Oslo) and, in particular, Maria Wyke (University of Reading) for valuable comments on drafts of this article. I would also like to thank *Arethusa*’s referees for helpful suggestions.

2 The debate was initiated in *Arethusa* 6 (1973) by J. P. Hallett and A. Betensky. See, most recently, Keith 1994 and 1997, Greene 1994 and 1995, Wyke 1995, and Flaschenriem 1999.

3 “From a Letter From Lesbia,” stanzas 2–3, from *The Portable Dorothy Parker* © 1928, renewed © 1956 by Dorothy Parker. Used by permission of Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc. U.K. rights by permission of Gerald Duckworth & Co.

How to deal with the intrusion of a female voice into Roman love poetry lies at the core of the reception of Sulpicia's poems. The Sulpician corpus consists of six short love poems of, in total, forty lines addressed to or about a male beloved. The combination of a female lover and a male beloved has a potentially disturbing effect on the structure of Roman elegy. One answer to this potential disturbance, however, is to exclude the Sulpician poems from the elegiac corpus, as the American scholar Kirby Flower Smith does in his commentary, *The Elegies of Albius Tibullus: The Corpus Tibullianum Edited with Introduction and Notes on Books I, II and IV, 2–14*, published in 1913. He reads the poems by Sulpicia not as poetry but as the record of a genuine love story from antiquity, and creates a "Sulpicia Americana" to meet contemporary American philological, psychological, and moral requirements.

The poems 3.13–18 (4.7–12) that you find at "the back" of Tibullus, in the so-called *Appendix Tibulliana*, are written from the first person perspective of *Sulpicia Servii filia* and are nowadays normally attributed to an Augustan Sulpicia.⁴ That has not always been the case, and is still the subject of heated discussion.⁵ Most recently, Niklas Holzberg (1999) has argued that the entire *Appendix* is a product of the Tiberian or post-Tiberian period. Besides being the subject of debates on authorship throughout the history of their reception, the Sulpician poems have also produced highly varying interpretations and judgements and still seem to challenge the modern reader and critic. Seemingly idiosyncratic attitudes to and conceptions of the elegiac genre,⁶ together with the expression of a female voice and female sexuality, make the Sulpician poems very interesting as a case study for an investigation of classical scholarship. As early as Jerome, a commentator's task has been described as an interpretative act.⁷ A basic

4 The *Corpus Tibullianum* is still sometimes divided into three books and sometimes into four, although the three-book division seems to be the modern consensus. I have therefore chosen to use the term *Appendix Tibulliana* for books three and four as does Tränkle 1990. Smith uses the four-book division, but for the sake of easy reference I principally refer to the three-book division numbers and give the four-book division numbers within brackets.

5 Hinds 1987.46 suggests that the poet could be "a post-Ovidian impersonation," although he hopes not. On the other hand, Parker 1994.39–62 argues that poems 3.9 (4.3) and 3.11 (4.5) might also have been written by the Augustan Sulpicia.

6 See Veyne's statement about elegy being misunderstood (1988.1): "Roman elegy is one of the most sophisticated art forms in the entire history of literature, but there are few genres whose nature has been more misunderstood."

7 In *Contra Rufinum* 1.16, Jerome discusses a commentator's task. In this discussion, Jerome uses forms both of *interpretari* and *interpretatio* in his description of the process.

premiss of this study is therefore that the knowledge communicated in commentaries is never disinterested, but instead it is implicated in the different structures of power, as has been very well demonstrated in relation to classical pedagogy in general.⁸ Since they are so full of controversial issues, the scholarly reception of Sulpicia's poems puts philology's hermeneutic nature vividly on display. In other words, their reception demonstrates how interpretative commentaries can be, and how they are coloured by the cultural horizons of different interpretative communities and by their intellectual contexts.⁹ Such colourings, captured in scholarly works, in turn influence how we think about Sulpicia.

This article seeks to explore a specific moment in the history of the reception of Sulpicia: the commentary by K. F. Smith. This scholarly commentary will be read as *text*: that is, as material for interpretation and analysis. Like Stanley Fish (1980), who, in his "Interpreting the Variorum," explores the theoretical assumptions behind a commentator's commentaries, I shall investigate the interpretative strategies and rhetoric employed in Smith's treatment of the Sulpician corpus and focus mainly on two aspects of them: how he treats a female elegiac voice and how he deals with female sexuality.

AN IMPORTANT STEP IN THE HISTORY OF AMERICAN SCHOLARSHIP

The commentary by Smith is probably the first any modern student working on the whole of the *Corpus Tibullianum* would use.¹⁰ And if you do not have a well-thumbed old copy, the German publisher Wissenschaftliche

8 See Too and Livingstone 1998. Several articles in this volume ask questions similar to the ones raised in this paper, although commentaries are not much dealt with (perhaps surprisingly, given their pedagogical purpose and status as evidence of pedagogical practice—in particular, given that commentaries often grow out of a series of lectures).

9 I am here drawing upon insights from the German *Rezeptionsästhetik* and its Anglo-American relative Reader Response Criticism. In doing so, I am not referring to a unified critical position, but to an emphasis on readers and readings found in the works of H. R. Jauss, I. A. Richards, S. Fish et al.

10 There are more recent commentaries on the Tibullan books, such as M. C. J. Putnam, *Tibullus: A Commentary* (Norman 1973); P. Murgatroyd, *Tibullus I: A Commentary on the First Book of the Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (Pietermaritzburg 1980); G. Lee, *Albius Tibullus: Elegiae* (Leeds 1990). But the only modern commentary to treat the Sulpician poems is the very recent German commentary, Tränkle 1990.

Buchgesellschaft reprinted it as late as 1971. At the time of its original publication, Smith's commentary received brilliant reviews and was immediately perceived as the new standard interpretation of Tibullus and the best commentary on the poet in any language.¹¹ It is still described as informative, enthusiastic, and genial.¹² The commentary constitutes a thick volume containing a substantial introduction, the entire text of the *Corpus*, notes on books 1 and 2, as well as parts of the *Appendix Tibulliana*. With its long introduction and general scope, the commentary is an illustration of Antony Grafton's statement that: "A commentary on almost any ancient author could thus become an introduction to classical literature, history and culture."¹³ It is also a very early example of what David Ross (1989) sees as typical of American classical scholarship in the twentieth century, namely, a drift towards the interpretative and literary, rather than the purely philological.

First published in 1913 by the American Book Company, Smith's edition represents an important step forward in American classical scholarship. Smith explicitly states that a major justification of his work is to publish a commentary in the English language. As he says in the first paragraph of his preface, the edition "contains the first detailed commentary in English upon the entire text of Tibullus, Sulpicia and the anonymous elegies of the fourth book. Whether the edition has any further justification of its existence must be left to the judgment of the reader" (7). Up to this point, the majority of Tibullan commentaries, like so much classical scholarship, was of German origin.¹⁴ The Tibullan themes of a rural idyll and the simple life appealed greatly to the Göttingen poet-scholars who were inspired by Rousseau.¹⁵ Nineteenth-century American scholarship in general, however, was also largely dominated by the German tradition.¹⁶ But, from being "entirely the product of the German" (Briggs and Calder 1990.x), it moved towards a greater independence with the foundation of the American Philological Association (1868) and the *American Journal of Philology*

11 Cf., e.g., A. L. Wheeler 1913, Rand 1914, and Helm 1914.

12 E.g., Kennedy 1995.225.

13 Quoted from Griffin 1995.13. This function is explicitly mentioned as a quality Smith's commentary possesses in the review by Rand 1914.183.

14 Such as Heyne 1755, Lachmann 1829, Dissen 1835, Gruppe 1838, Baehrens 1876 and 1878, Belling 1893 and 1897.

15 See Schuster 1930.183–201.

16 Oleson and Voss 1979.xvii.

(1880).¹⁷ The latter, according to its initiator Basil Gildersleeve, was to be “a truly American journal” based on independent scholarship and reference to the American sphere.¹⁸ Smith himself was a “truly American” scholar, being a professor at Johns Hopkins and one of the first American classical scholars not to hold a German doctorate.¹⁹ Dedicating his commentary on Tibullus to Gildersleeve, addressing it primarily to American students, and employing references to America,²⁰ Smith proceeded to challenge the Germanic tradition from within the heart of that tradition itself.

Smith’s commentary was also an important step forward in Sulpician scholarship.²¹ After the German scholar Otto Gruppe separated and identified the Sulpician corpus in 1838, a debate around feminine Latin (*weibliches Latein*) emerged.²² Considered one of the few surviving collections of writings by a Roman woman, it was used by scholars to investigate how women spoke Latin and to map a female Latin grammar.²³ Smith, however, dispenses with the entire debate while still offering Sulpicia’s poems a great deal of attention and enthusiasm. The Sulpicia poems are accompanied by the so-called Amicus poems that deal with the Sulpician affair both from an external point of view and in Sulpicia’s own voice, 3.8–3.12 (4.2–4.6). Smith finds the Sulpicia and Amicus poems “by far the best and most interesting in the entire collection” (77), and his account prefigures the renewed interest these poems have received since their reconsideration by

17 As Paul Shorey said in his speech at the fiftieth-anniversary of the APA (Shorey 1919.44), the wish was “to establish a tradition of the independence of American scholarship” as there were still “too many Americans who regard a German book as in itself an authority.”

18 Gildersleeve 1916.114. According to Shorey 1919.46, even President Roosevelt loathed classicists for being too reverent towards the Germans, “when Roosevelt was rough-riding on his own in literature the encouragement he gave us [the APA] was simply to sneer at the man who spends his youth at a German University and can thenceforth work only in the fields fifty times furrowed by the Germans.”

19 Smith received his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins in 1899. For a biography of Smith, see Briggs 1987.381–82 and Gildersleeve 1919.

20 In an article defending his choice of a broad treatment of Tibullus’ *Nachleben* (Smith 1916.133), Smith emphasises that the commentary is primarily written for American students. Specific “Americanisms” in his commentary are, e.g., references to Walt Whitman (402) and Americans in Paris (50).

21 There is a recent bibliography and short survey of Sulpician scholarship: Piastrì 1998.

22 Gruppe 1838.27–64. This topic was taken up by E. Baehrens 1876 and 1878.41–46, H. Belling 1893 and 1897, Schanz-Hosius 19354.189–91, and still to be read in *RE* 1319–29 (Marx 1890). However, G. F. Herzberg 1839.1012 had already criticised this approach.

23 On the futility of this approach, see Adams 1984 and Gilleland 1980.

Matthew Santirocco in 1979. In light of the contemporary focus on “the woman question” and the rhetoric of the “eternal feminine,” I shall argue that Smith lifts the femininity of the poems from the purely grammatical to the psychological and sociological (although not to the poetical), and thereby opens up the field of Sulpician studies.

SULPICIA: A NON-ELEGIAC *PUELLA*²⁴

Many readers have found the poems puzzling; there is something disturbing about the way Sulpicia writes. Scholars have generally resorted to ascribing this disturbance to the femininity of the author or to re-categorising the elegies as letters and not poems—or they have employed a combination of the two. Smith uses just such a combination, but in a manner that displays several inconsistencies intrinsic both to his analysis of Sulpicia and in relation to his general reading of Latin elegy.

The most characteristic trait of Smith’s reading of Latin poetry is his generic approach. In almost every book review he wrote, Smith argued that, as a result of evolutionary theory, the history of literature had to be seen as the development of an organism and, therefore, that the context and the genre of a literary work were extremely important. And, to him, Roman elegy was one of the most striking illustrations of the principle “that in order to understand ancient literature we must investigate it thoroughly, not alone by authors and periods but also by departments.”²⁵ Accordingly, in his commentary, he provides a thorough investigation of the elegiac genre and gives a section on elegy the first place in his introduction. Smith’s generic emphasis in his treatment of elegiac poetry was inspired by Crusius’ concept of genre (Crusius 1905). However, by inserting Crusius’ idea of elegy into the context of evolutionary theory, Smith made it a new concept and thus responded to Gildersleeve’s call for the Americanisation of German scholarship.

Roman elegy, according to Smith (27–29), is highly rhetorical, rarely intense, and “has a fondness for *genre*” (28). The situations are

24 I here use the term “elegiac *puella*” as it is used in, e.g., Wyke 1995.

25 Smith 1904.90. Smith was a prolific writer of review articles for the *AJP* from about 1896 until his death in 1916. His generic approach is a development of the thoughts of the French literary critic Ferdinand Brunetière (*L’évolution des genres dans l’histoire de la littérature française* 1890), who is also mentioned by Gildersleeve.

typical, such as those of the *servitium amoris* and the *exclusus amator*, and the characters are stock; the beloved has the social status of a freedwoman and the lover is bound to be “most horribly in love” (43). Furthermore, the “apparent absence of anything like artifice” and “the effect of unstudied ease and naturalness” are “in harmony with the *ars celare artem*” (29). Thus the American scholar sees elegy as far from direct cries of the heart, in many ways prefiguring Paul Veyne’s sophisticated elegy (1988) and Duncan Kennedy’s Barthesian lover’s discourse (1993). To Smith, the poems are “in form biographical,” but interwoven with literary motives, so that “only those who are in the secret can be sure which is which. The rest of the world must be content to guess” (43). In general, therefore, Smith takes up a position between what he calls “the old commentators,” who took everything in the elegiac poems at face value, and the “sweeping incredulity of some modern critics” (29). Elegy should be read, as he says in a book review, as “poetry first and biography after” (1900.462). This view of elegy, with its emphasis on generic patterns, runs through Smith’s commentary on Tibullus as well as his analysis of the Amicus poems to such an extent that it is easily his most common explanatory mode.

It is therefore striking to notice the complete absence of references to the elegiac repertoire in Smith’s commentary on the Sulpicia poems. The commentator refers to the illness in Amicus 3.10 (4.4) as a conventional elegiac theme, while failing to do so for the Sulpician pendent, 3.17 (4.11). Similarly, in the case of the first Sulpician birthday-poem 3.14 (4.8), he chooses not to read this in the context of a *genethliakon*. Nor does he suggest that the theme of loathing the countryside (set out in the first line as *rure molesto*) might be a potential inversion of the normal Tibullan idyllic praise of the pastoral life. On the contrary, he remarks that “none of these epithets is to be taken seriously,” as they are all expressions of Sulpicia’s anger; “the girlish keenness of her disappointment is reflected in every epithet” (509).

This lack of reference to the elegiac genre in Smith’s commentary on the Sulpician corpus is therefore in marked contrast to his general approach. However, this contrast is easily explained since he does not consider the poems as elegiac at all—in fact, they should not even be regarded as poetry. They are, with the exception of the first poem, which Smith considers to be much like an entry in Sulpicia’s diary, “brief notes to Cerinthus himself, and it seems evident that none of them was ever intended for publication” (79). By giving the Sulpician poems a non-poetic status, Smith renders them “documents” that tell us “the charming story of the two young lovers” (77). The rest of love elegy was to Smith “poetry first and

biography second,” but these poems are first of all interesting as biography. Thus while Smith finds it strange that modern scholars have taken Tibullus at his word when thinking that his poems were only meant to win his lady-love (29), he believes Sulpicia when she claims to write “notes” to Cerinthus.

The exceptional non-literary status ascribed to Sulpicia’s poems is very clear when further compared to that of the Amicus poems. In Smith’s view, the Sulpicia poems are the material of which the Amicus poems are artistic elaborations (78-79):

A close examination of these five poems [the Amicus poems] suggests that the actual foundation of them was the series next to be considered [the Sulpicia poems]. . . . If so, not the least interesting feature of this collection is the unique opportunity it offers to study the methods pursued by an antique elegiac poet in the artistic use of his material.

This is very much the same critical strategy that Gruppe used, more than half a century earlier, when he compared the relation between the two groups of poems to the connection between Goethe’s *Sonnets* and Bettina von Arnim’s letters.²⁶ Subsequently, it is an approach that has been taken by Esther Bréguet in her *Le roman de Sulpicia* (1946), where she is mostly interested in identifying the author of the Amicus poems,²⁷ and, even more recently, Hubert Creekmore has argued that “Sulpicia’s poems were not written to be artistic creations, as were those of Tibullus based on them; the only artfulness about hers is that she expressed her emotion in verses rather than in prose . . . One may ask why she bothered with metre at all” (1966.105–06). However, in contrast to Bréguet and Creekmore, who find value only in the Amicus poems, Smith finds the Sulpicia poems “the more interesting because they were apparently not written for the purpose of telling her story after the artistic fashion of the elegy” (79). For the American commentator, Sulpicia’s poems are the most valuable part of the *Appendix Tibulliana* exactly because they are not polished and, therefore, are in his opinion a more authentic documentation of events. While Gruppe was interested in the

²⁶ Gruppe 1838.56, cf. also Skoie 1998.

²⁷ Bréguet 1946. The identity of the Amicus poet is much debated. For a résumé of this debate, see Fredericks 1976.761–62 n.1.

production of art, Smith is interested in the love story behind that art. Characteristically, he twice calls the reader of these poems an “onlooker,” thus making the reading of these poems a somewhat voyeuristic activity (82 and 509). Accordingly, although Smith is interested in the linking of the two cycles of poems because they tell two parts of the same story, his interest mostly resides in the Sulpician part, as can clearly be seen from the amount of space the two are given in the preface: while Sulpicia’s poems get five pages of treatment, the Amicus poems only get two. The closeness to a love story and the “full heart” that Sulpicia writes from seem to be the fatal attraction for Smith (80). He even calls this “the intrinsic value and interest” of the poems (80).

Smith’s treatments of simplicity in the cases of Tibullus and Sulpicia are completely opposed and exemplify the inconsistencies in Smith’s approach. Regarding Tibullus, he remarks that: “Of course his simplicity is not artless. No competent critic in these days, certainly no classical scholar worthy of the name, needs to be reminded that in a literary masterpiece simplicity is always deliberate and naïveté always artistic. Tibullus is a conscious artist” (68). When it comes to Sulpicia, however, and a document supposedly not intended for publication, the complete opposite is true. Here simplicity is not seen as the product of “a conscious artist” but as a natural gift. Twelve pages after he has argued that simplicity is the product of a conscious artist in Tibullus’ case, Smith goes on to claim that “this slip of a girl has that rarest of all gifts, the gift of straightforward simplicity . . . The consequence is that in a scant forty lines she has contrived to impress herself upon us more deeply than many other writers have done who have spent a whole lifetime pursuing the same subject by more sophisticated methods” (80). Furthermore, when the American scholar occasionally deals with certain features of stylistics and metre in the Sulpician poems, he does not put them into a wider context or give them any thematic value, as has been the main approach to these poems since the interventions first of Santirocco (1979) and later Nick Lowe (1988). For Smith, language and syntax are not elements of a poetic programme, but windows into the mind of Sulpicia.

The most interesting consequence of the non-elegiac status ascribed by Smith to these poems is the disappearance of the recognised problem that a female voice here enters “an obstinately male genre.” There is now no need to investigate how a woman author fits in or appropriates the generic situations of love elegy. This can be illustrated by the very different approaches Smith takes to role-reversal in the Amicus poems and the Sulpician poems. In his introduction to the commentary on the Sulpician

poems, Smith reads the evident reversal of elegy's normal gender-roles as proof of the poems' non-literary character. When Smith discusses at this point the muteness of Cerinthus and the assertiveness of Sulpicia, he draws the conclusion that this is a real situation: "the mere fact that the ordinary conditions of the elegy are in this instance reversed is in itself a good proof that we are dealing with realities" (85). Elegy is here seen as a fixed system with no place for such a reversal. Sulpicia is therefore not disturbing or appropriating this system at all because she finds her voice outside the elegiac genre.

Role-reversal, however, gets a very different treatment in the case of the Amicus poems. Smith's commentary introduces the Amicus poem 3.10 (4.6) as follows (78):

Cerinthus is vitally interested in the welfare of his beloved, and at first thought we should expect him to speak in his own person here, as Sulpicia has done in the previous elegy. Our poet however is more artistic. In the case of this particular pair of lovers the conventional situation of the elegy is reversed. The girl writes the poetry, the youth has nothing to say; or at all events his contributions to the literature of the affair, though doubtless of a highly inflammable nature and treasured by the recipient with corresponding care, were nevertheless in plain prose, and as such have not survived. Whenever therefore the feelings of Cerinthus require expression, our poet acts as spokesman.

In a case where the Amicus poet finds non-elegiac material that needs transformation into artistic elegy, role-reversal represents a challenge but not an impossibility. It is worth noticing that the biggest obstacle the Amicus poet faces in the view of Smith, however, is not the verbal Sulpicia, but the mute Cerinthus. At first glance, it seems that here Sulpicia is allowed an elegiac voice, while Cerinthus needs a spokesperson. But it is important to remember that Sulpicia's elegiac voice in the Amicus poems is already mediated through a spokesman, namely the Amicus poet. Thus she does not have any elegiac voice except through her spokesman, and the role-reversal is only seen as a problem when the poetry is defined as elegiac. For Smith, only a true (male) poet can meet—or rather has to meet—the artistic challenge of role-reversal.

A PARAGON OF FEMININITY: "LIKE A NATURAL WOMAN"

The American commentator's definition of Sulpicia's poems as non-elegiac and as "documents" of a story allows for an investigation of the "real love story" and the "real Sulpicia." Smith accordingly reads Sulpicia as a real character without having to deal with the complicated relationships between a character as a literary construct and his or her real world model.²⁸ In a review of Schulze's school edition of Roman elegy, he thus comments on a perceived difference between Sulpicia and the other elegiac *puellae* (1901.323):

If we possess any imagination—and it will be a sorry day when imagination and scholarship finally part company—we illuminate the dark corners of this question [whether Sulpicia got married or not] with the feeling that, amid the feminine characters of the Elegy, all of whom are so suspiciously typical, here, at least, is a genuine girl, of sufficient brains and position to make her emotions a matter of interest, and really in love with an actual, if not a genuine man.

Paradoxically, by being atypical (that is, a speaking elegiac woman), Sulpicia has achieved the status of being "a genuine girl" as opposed to the other elegiac *puellae* who are "so suspiciously typical." This strategy allows for a psychological reading of Sulpicia out of her poems. The fact that psychology, at the time, was a discipline that prospered more in the US than in any other country and that Johns Hopkins University was to play a major role in furthering the discipline also make Smith's psychological approach very timely.²⁹ William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1890) had a wide impact on society in general, and the foundation of the *American Journal of Psychology* at Johns Hopkins (1887), as well as the success of the Johns Hopkins men G. Stanley Hall and John Dewey, contributed to a particularly important position for psychology in Smith's immediate academic environment.

28 Different views on this process are represented in Lyne 1980, Veyne 1988, Kennedy 1993, Wyke 1995.

29 Bolles 1993.207 and 200.

In the case of the last poem of the Sulpician collection, 3.18 (4.12), Smith comments that the “mixtures of motives responsible for the last two lines would occupy at least a chapter in a modern psychological novel” (83). And, further on, he states that: “As it stands it is a revelation, the more eloquent because wholly unconscious, of the girl’s gentle nurture and essential innocence” (83). Thus Sulpicia’s poems are to be read as windows not only onto a love story but also onto the character and even the unconscious of Sulpicia herself. Accordingly, Smith paints a vivid picture of a genuine girl whom he suspects was “somewhat wilful and, let us confess it, a trifle spoiled” (77), and constructs a psycho-chronological narrative of the events depicted in the poems (81).³⁰

Sulpicia’s status as a “genuine woman” even helps explain otherwise difficult elements in the poems (81, my italics):

. . . mere sex in itself is clearly reflected in habits of thought and points of view. A genuine woman reacts so to speak to a given emotional stimulus in a way more or less characteristic of every other genuine woman in the same situation. In this respect nothing in all literature could be more characteristically feminine than these elegies. *Their charming author is beyond all doubt a very woman. It is really for that reason that her poetry is undeniably so difficult.*

According to Smith, the poems are difficult because they are written by a woman. As when, in his formulation, “language, syntax and arrangement” betray Sulpicia’s frame of mind, here “habits of thought and points of view” reflect her sex. However, Smith is anxious to distinguish his interest in what he perceives as the femininity of the Sulpician poems from the idea of a feminine Latinity that emerged with, and in the aftermath of, Gruppe’s *Die römische Elegie* (1838). Far from mapping out a female grammar and using the poems of Sulpicia as primary evidence for how women spoke Latin, the commentator finds the theme “overworked” and the phenomena “not conclusive” (80). His interest in femininity is not philological but psychological.

30 However, he does not physically rearrange the text in such an order as, e.g., Creekmore 1966 does. A reorganisation of the poems is most recently argued in Merriam 1990.

Although Smith regards any attempts to find feminine Latinity in Sulpicia's poems futile, he does see the poems as distinctively feminine: "nothing in all literature could be more characteristically feminine than these elegies." He also finds this feminine quality in their "habits of thought and points of view." In somewhat scientific terms, he explains how the poems are a female reaction to "a given emotional stimulus." Their difficulty is explained away by their feminine way of thinking (81):

Her way of thinking is distinctively feminine, and though we may be familiar with it in the modern sphere of our own personal experience, it is less easy to follow in Latin, because Latin as we know it in the surviving literature is distinctively and exclusively masculine. She is feminine in what she says and the way she says it. On the other hand, and this is the real difficulty, she is quite as feminine in what she does not say.

Femininity is thus revealed, according to Smith, in a manner of thinking, as well as in expressions of thought, and not least in gaps or what is not said. And here, for the first time, the scholar admits that he encounters a certain difficulty with the female intrusion in a literature "that is distinctively and exclusively masculine." Smith's solution to this problem is to claim that, at least in written form, this young woman only "spoke" Latin with difficulty. This is seen for example in his treatment of 3.13 (4.7).

Tandem venit amor, qualem texisse pudori
 quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama magis.
exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis
 attulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.
exoluit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,
 dicetur si quis non habuisse sua.
non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,
 me legat ut nemo quam meus ante, velim,
se pecasse iuvat, vultus componere famae
 taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

At last love has come; and the rumour that I have concealed it would shame me more than disclosure. Won over by my Muse's prayers, Cytherea's queen has brought and

placed him in my arms. What Venus promised she hath fulfilled. Let my joys be told of all of whom 'tis said that they have missed their own. Never would I entrust my messages to tablets under seal, that no one might read them before my lover. Nay, I love my fault, and loathe to wear a mask for rumour. Let all hear that we have met, each worthy of each other.³¹

Smith comments as follows on lines 7–8 (505-06):

7–8. . . . These lines are prominent in the old discussion of 'Feminine Latinity,' and their undeniable difficulty has been more than once traced to the writer's incomplete command of literary form. The difficulty, however, is not a matter of inexperience, but a matter of sex. Sulpicia is a woman, she realizes, as only a woman can, the consequences of exposure, she dreads them, as only a woman can and should; hence, for example, the intrusion of *fama* in the first distich, which constitutes the real difficulty of the first sentence, and which a man would probably not have used. Nor has she any idea of running the risk of detection; the subjunctives, as we have seen, indicate inclination, not intention. On the other hand, is her love an overpowering passion for one to whom she is glad and proud to belong. [*sic*] Here are two master motives. What could be more natural and more distinctively feminine, especially in a poem intended for the eyes of her lover alone, than that Sulpicia should measure the depth of her love in terms of her dread of the consequences if it were discovered? . . . All this underlies the whole poem, though it does not come out clearly until the last distich.

Here the reader can see how Smith sees the feminine situation as clearly distinct from the masculine sphere in a system of genders that is fixed once and for all. In his rhetorically repetitive manner, the expression "as only a

31 The text is Postgate's OCT 1915² and the translation is his Loeb edition from 1911—thus almost contemporary with Smith's commentary.

woman can” is repeated, and “the intrusion of *fama*” is a concept “a man would probably not have used.” This comment, however, is not only a description of a fixed system, it also seems normative; Sulpicia dreads the consequences of exposure “as only a woman can and should.”

By focusing on the issue of *fama* and the issue of wanting to tell but not being able to, Smith is here moving along some of the lines followed by more recent scholars on the Sulpician poems. In particular, those who treat 3.13 (4.7) as a programmatic poem read the issue of *fama* as thematic: how can you write and tell as a woman?³² However, there is a big difference; modern scholars do not necessarily interpret this question as arising out of a feminine world of thought or a feminine reality, but focus rather on the conditions of being a female poet in Augustan society or on the literarity and self-reflection of the text they consider inherent in the genre of elegy.³³ Nick Lowe interprets the entire poem as “about discourse” and concludes: “The final theme of the poem, then, is not reputation per se, but the wider irony of writing public poetry on private experience, especially when the experience is scandalous and, at least in principle, potentially explosive: a Roman woman’s exercise of sexual choice” (1988.204). In view of the modern focus on poetics as one of the core themes of elegy, this emphasis on *fama* is now seen as an appropriation of common elegiac discursive strategies by the Sulpician narrator.³⁴ Most recently, this use of *fama* is read as an echo of Virgil *Aeneid* 4.320–23, and therefore forms a part of Alison Keith’s argument that the Dido episode establishes an important literary context for Sulpician elegy (1997). Smith, however, is taking *fama* in a realistic and not in a poetic sense. Statements in the poems are read as witnesses to the character of the real Sulpicia, not as narrative strategies from a poet. Furthermore, he is emphasising the idea of inhibition rather than the fact that she, against all odds, is speaking about her love.

The American scholar makes it very clear that, for him, this is not a question of female poetics or an anticipation of what would now be called some kind of Cixousian *écriture féminine*.³⁵ Smith is not interested in Sulpicia in terms of women’s *literature*. In the introduction to the commentary,

32 E.g., Santirocco 1979.235 notes that the repetition of *fama* is thematic.

33 Even more so as Smith insists on this poem being written for herself only.

34 E.g., Wyke 1995.114 and 120.

35 Even if Smith were outlining a female poetics, it would be far from *écriture féminine* as it is described in Cixous 1975. By emphasising “spontaneity” and “feeling” in Sulpicia, Smith is outlining a feminine writing that Cixous calls unimportant and deceptive.

he has already distinguished the poetry of Sulpicia from that of other female poets: in connection with his appraisal of her simplicity, he remarks that this is something she does not share with the second Sulpicia or “some of her poetical sisters in centuries nearer to our own” (80). Furthermore, he notes that she “shows no trace of self-consciousness and no sign of affectation”—characteristics that he finds in other female authors (80). Accordingly, he argues against any comparison of the poems of Sulpicia with the letters of Héloïse, because Héloïse ostensibly wrote with a view to publishing her letters, while Sulpicia did not.³⁶ Thus Smith seems to be studying the femininity of these Roman poems in the light of some kind of *real* psychological femininity not a *literary* femininity. This stance is also clear from the way he finds parallels in the *Heroides*: what he wants paralleled are general feelings and sentiments, not specific words.³⁷ This interest in femininity might have been enforced by what Smith calls a “gradual feminization of culture” (18). Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, women were becoming more visible in American society. The educational system had, by the end of the nineteenth century, begun to offer opportunities for women,³⁸ and, even though classics was somewhat lagging behind due to the required Latin and Greek, the APA saw a female president for the 1899/1900 term, Abby Leach.³⁹ Yet while the United States had the first organised women’s movement (1848), the suffragette movement had a long struggle before the general right to vote for women was given in 1920. In light of this development, the concept of femininity was up for debate. In such a social context, Smith’s emphasis on Sulpicia’s femininity remaining within the boundaries of traditional notions of gender becomes very significant.

36 Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) used 3.13 (4.7) together with the letters from Héloïse to Abelard in his discussion of the fact that Francesca, not Paulo, tells the story in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*: Foscolo 1979.ix.1.449. Smith (506) argues against Foscolo: “The citation of Sulpicia here is not so apposite as the famous passage (which he also cites) in the letters of Héloïse to Abelard. Foscolo . . . seems to have taken it for granted, as did many of the older scholars, that Sulpicia here was actually taking the reading public (really or ostensibly) into her confidence.”

37 For example, in his comment on 3.13.10 (4.7.10), Smith uses *Heroides* 17.49 as a parallel for a feeling of pride, although the exact words of the text are very different (508).

38 Women’s colleges “dotted” the educational landscape in the nineteenth century, e.g., Mount Holyoke (1837), Vassar (1861), Wellesley (1870), and Bryn Mawr (1885), and, in the 1870s, major midwestern universities started to offer coeducation for women students. By 1900, 85,000 women were studying in colleges and universities: Cotkin 1992.75.

39 See Briggs 1996/97. For early female classicists, see the special issue of *Classical World* 90.2–3, “Six Women Classicists.”

The American scholar even seems to be seduced by this Roman femininity and the “charming author” (81) of these poems. Poem 3.17 (4.11) is “a touching letter” (515), and the author has impressed herself more deeply on Smith than many other more sophisticated writers (80). His mentions of terms for femininity or womanhood throughout the commentary are too numerous to count. Sulpicia, however, is not just a woman, she is “a genuine woman” or a “very woman.” She comes out with “truly feminine announcements” (515), and thus represents the essence of womanhood for Smith. His frequent generalisations and references to “lover’s usage” make Sulpicia into a paragon rather than an individual case—and not so much a paragon of a Roman woman but a paragon of timeless womanhood. Sulpicia’s general status is supported by Smith with references to diaries and psychological novels. And this timeless womanhood seems to charm the commentator to such an extent that he even sees in Sulpicia a paradigm for how all women should behave (506).

This presentation of Sulpicia as a paragon of femininity resembles the concept of the “eternal feminine” (*Das Ewig-weibliche*) in its American version, True Womanhood.⁴⁰ This rather vague concept was predominant in American discourse throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth. In a society undergoing such rapid change as late nineteenth-century America, “true” American women became, as Barbara Welter puts it, the ones who “had to uphold the pillars of the temple” (1976.21). Epithets like “true” and “genuine” appeared as stock epithets when talking about women in women’s magazines, gift annuals, and religious literature.⁴¹ Thus Smith’s preoccupation with Sulpicia’s ideal femininity has a clear parallel in his contemporary American society and shows another way in which he displays his Americanism. Such an ideal status might be difficult to combine with a sexually explicit Sulpicia, but also here, as I shall argue below, Smith can draw on contemporary notions of

40 Welter even calls this preoccupation a “cult,” see Welter 1976.21–41. Her concept of “True Womanhood” evoked a major historiographical debate as to whether this concept provided women a limited sphere of influence or a powerful base of support. For my purpose, however, the important issue at stake here is the recognition of such a rhetoric, and, as with the concept of “the American Girl” (see below), I find the ambiguity useful. Smith is not the only scholar who has explicitly embraced Sulpicia with the rhetoric of the “eternal feminine.” Similar processes are also to some extent at play in the reception of Ovid’s *Heroides*, although, in the case of Ovid, the voices of the heroines are of course seen as Ovidian fictions.

41 See Welter 1976.211 n. 1.

women: in this case, a particular sub-category of the True Woman, namely the American Girl.

SULPICIA'S ESSENTIAL INNOCENCE

Sulpicia's paradigmatic and non-elegiac status in Smith's commentary makes his approach to female sexuality more complicated than if he could write off Sulpicia's sexuality as a purely literary construct. As Gruppe observed, the poems contain material for an *histoire scandaleuse* (1838.56). Although the non-elegiac status attributed to them by Smith makes role-reversal easier to handle, it is nonetheless a problem when one considers the sexual implications of the poems. While elegiac *puellae* are partly poetic fictions and, by definition, loose women, Sulpicia is a patrician Roman possessing "a large portion and one of the longest pedigrees in the Empire" (77). When such a girl is sexually explicit she "belongs to a type certain to be variously judged, not only by her contemporaries, but by her readers" (504).

The last part of line 10 in poem 3.13 (4.7) has regularly been seen as the most problematic: *cum digno digna fuisse ferar*. This statement clearly indicates to the reader that Sulpicia has had sex with Cerinthus.⁴² The earlier scholarly tradition mostly treated this verse with silence,⁴³ described it as a hyperbolic statement in the heat of the moment (in reality, there was only a kiss),⁴⁴ or resolved the problem by marrying Sulpicia off to Cerinthus.⁴⁵ Smith, however, suggests, somewhat surprisingly, a fourth way of dealing with this delicate situation (504):

Of course still another solution is quite possible. We might suggest that these verses are not the record of a genuine affair, but merely a series of literary exercises written, it is true, by Sulpicia, but merely the record, let us

42 This euphemism occurs throughout the Latin language, cf., e. g., Varro *L. L.* 6.80: *violavit virginem pro vitiavit dicebant, aequae eadem modestia potius cum muliere fuisse quam concubuisse dicebant*, commented on in Adams 1982.177.

43 See, e.g., Cyllenius 1475 and Statius 1567.

44 See, e.g., Dissen 1835.452.

45 Schulze 1900 and Voss 1810. Voss 1810.316 even suggests that the meeting in 3.18 (4.12) was Cerinthus having tea with Sulpicia and her parents like any other fiancé. Most recently, the marriage theory can be found in Creekmore 1966.106.

say, of her own contribution to a theme proposed and worked upon in concert in the inner circle of Messalla's poetical friends. In that case the question would settle itself by ceasing to exist.

To write off moral complications by appealing to literariness is a technique Smith uses elsewhere in other instances of morally questionable poems, such as the Marathus poems (1. 4, 1. 8, and 1. 9): "it is likely that he is no more real than those fair and fragile Hellenic damsels of syllabled air that smile and frown upon us from the pages of Horace" (50). Marathus is only "syllabled air" and therefore does not have to be taken into consideration in the wider picture of Tibullus' morality, although Smith does admit that "the vices of the Greeks had the same attraction for the Romans, especially for the cruder type, that the lower life of Paris seems to have for so many Americans" (50). Here, however, Marathus is only a literary construct and so the homosexuality displayed by Tibullus in these elegies needs neither defending nor further comment.

This tactic is impossible in the case of Sulpicia, however, as throughout his commentary Smith treats her as a genuine girl. He had already rejected the marriage solution in a review of Schulze's edition of the Roman elegists twelve years before the publication of his own commentary. Responding to Schulze's depiction of Sulpicia as married to Cerinthus, Smith says: "those of us who have toiled over the Sulpicia question will heartily sympathize with the feelings, although unconvinced by the logic. . . . We scorn the possibility that the daughter of Servius Sulpicius could have been ill-favoured or *passée*. We joyfully welcome anything to believe that this attractive and wilful young person was happily united to her Gaius in the bonds of holy *confarreatio*" (1901.323). Nonetheless, despite this desire to see her married off to Cerinthus, Smith objects to the identification of Cerinthus with Cornutus and the *uxor* of Tibullus 2.2 with Sulpicia; yet again Smith is "sorely tempted to believe it" (86), but the question is "incapable of a definite solution, and it is the part of wisdom to leave it so" (87). Smith does believe that Sulpicia got married in the end, although not necessarily to Cerinthus: in his presentation of Sulpicia as not ranking "among the great poets of the world," he remarks that "after her marriage she probably never wrote another line" (79–80). Apart from the above remark, however, Sulpicia's final marital status is never mentioned. Thus this one remark has more the character of a slip of the tongue and illustrates Smith's desire to make Sulpicia a respectable woman.

Given the fact that Smith states that poem 3.13 (4.7) was “written just after the consummation of her love” (504) and given his explanation of the lemma *cum . . . fuisse* (508), it is clear that he interprets the last line of this poem as referring to actual sexual intercourse. However, he uses several strategies to make this a decent event. Firstly, the commentator makes poem 3.13 (4.7) psycho-chronologically the final poem in the cycle: Sulpicia does not surrender immediately, but after some time (81–82). The Roman patrician can therefore be said to be no loose woman, as she does not act until she knows her beloved. Secondly, according to Smith, Sulpicia may have had sex, but it should not be without any bitter afterthoughts. He ascribes the sentiment of the poem to the heat of the moment, “she is still in a highly exalted mood,” and writes this poem in a diary for her eyes only (504). However, according to Smith, Sulpicia will eventually be “assailed by the afterthoughts inevitable in such an affair” (504 and 85).⁴⁶ Like the unfaithful heroine in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s popular novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a woman should manifestly repent such actions.

Even though he treats poem 3.13 (4.7) as “written after the consummation,” Smith describes Sulpicia as innocent. He summarises the story of this “well-matched pair of lovers—he, the shy and reserved but deeply smitten youth . . . she, the frank, ardent, impulsive maiden of letters. He is her natural quarry, and when once she sights him the final outcome is a foregone conclusion” (85). Instead of focusing on the oddity of this reversal of the elegiac system or characterising Sulpicia as somehow playing the male, Smith sees Cerinthus as the natural match for the character of Sulpicia. And this is a match made by “love at first sight”—a feature never mentioned in the Sulpician cycle and one that seems to be taken straight out of a contemporary novel. We see the commentator filling in gaps in order to make this love story an impeccable one. Stricken by love at first sight, Sulpicia’s “fall” might become less a fault of her own character or womanhood than sheer fate. After all, with love at first sight, what can one do but be obliged to yield to it? Thus, after this, Sulpicia’s reaction is described as follows: “the greater frankness and naïveté of Sulpicia in the same situation is quite as characteristic of her youth, her sex, and her essential innocence” (85–86). Sulpicia is, according to Smith, the possessor of “essential innocence” even after having had sex with Cerinthus.

46 As evidence for the inevitability of such an afterthought, Smith refers to Amicus 3.11.6–14 (4.5.6–14) and *Heroides* 18.93 and “every similar affair since the world began” (85).

This rather oxymoronic notion of an innocent Sulpicia seems to be representative of a sub-category of the True Woman, namely the American Girl. According to P. J. Eakin, the American Girl, as embodied in American nineteenth-century literature, was a synthesis of “the rebel’s dangerous pursuit of self-culture and the maiden’s indulgence in morbid renunciations” (1976.221). In other words, the American Girl would “gesture coquette,” but then maidenly shake her head (Emily Dickinson, “The Letter”: see page 307). The archetype of the American Girl is the main character in Henry James’ short story “Daisy Miller” (1879), who could be defined as an inscrutable combination of audacity and innocence. The American Girl came to be representative of nineteenth-century America both in the novels by James as well as in general discourse,⁴⁷ and was followed up and explored in the twentieth century by, for example, Edith Wharton.⁴⁸ According to Welter, the American Girl was bred “to show the superiority of freedom linked to moral purity.” And as “the dilemma of democracy had always been to retain both freedom and power; the dilemma of the American girl, to be both bold and innocent, was equally perplexing and equally unresolved” (1976.20). Smith’s Sulpicia’s outspokenness and essential innocence might be seen as a parallel case to that of the American Girl. Smith’s Sulpicia plays the active part, has a sexual *tête-à-tête* with her beloved, and does not immediately think about the consequences.⁴⁹ She is, however, still essentially innocent, and her oxymoronic status is ultimately resolved not by death, as in “Daisy Miller,” but by a marriage: the ultimate goal for any American Girl and a final resolution for such oxymoronic states.

An “essentially innocent” Sulpicia also fits in with the general image of antiquity in America where Lew Wallace’s moralistic novel of Christian Rome, *Ben Hur* (1880), was still a great commercial success. At

47 See Welter 1976.3–20.

48 The two female heroines in Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Ellen Olenska and May Welland, might, for example, be seen as explorations of the dilemma of the American Girl.

49 There is also a nice link between James’ “Daisy Miller” and Sulpicia in the fact that most of the action takes place in Rome. Furthermore, the prudish Mrs. Costello disapproves of Daisy’s behaviour with a reference to the Golden Age. “She romps on from day to day, from hour to hour, as they did in the Golden Age,” James 1985.66. If one considers that this utterance is given in Rome, it is not unlikely that the Golden Age referred to is that of Augustan Rome.

the time, American academe, and in particular classical philology, had to legitimise itself both in relation to Europe and to American society at large.⁵⁰ And, as Thomas Habinek points out, it was “the awareness in the culture at large of the connection between Roman legal, political, and social ideals and the realities of American life” that kept Latin alive in secondary schools and universities (1998.22). In such a climate, a morally acceptable Sulpicia was called for. By labelling Sulpicia “essentially innocent” and calling attention to her afterthoughts, Smith therefore constructs a Sulpicia who can become acceptable both within the American academic community and in twentieth-century American society at large.

CONCLUSION

Quot editores, tot Propertii is a famous saying by the Propertian scholar Phillimore.⁵¹ I am tempted to appropriate it for commentators on Sulpicia and say, *quot commentatores, tot Sulpiciae*. In dialogue with the text, each commentator reads and puts down on paper his or her version of Sulpicia coloured by his or her own intellectual community.⁵² Like a Pygmalion, the commentator constructs his own Sulpicia and might in so doing be regarded as a co-poet.⁵³ Throughout the reception of Sulpicia’s poems, a reader of commentaries meets different Sulpiciae and different attitudes towards her voice and sexuality. This article has looked at a specific reading of Sulpicia and found a non-elegiac Sulpicia in a reading model where the text is a window onto a genuine love story and the reader established as a voyeur.

Through his desire to create a morally acceptable character and his enthusiastic presentation of a “somewhat wilful” girl, Smith contradicts his general generic approach. Furthermore, through his American scholarly

50 There was a marked dislike on the other side of the Atlantic for American classical scholarship, as can be seen in Kroll 1905, which does not mention American scholars at all, and in Wilamowitz 1982, which scarcely mentions the United States and thinks it singular that now “America too should be building museums” (156). (Cf. also the Introduction by Hugh Lloyd-Jones p. xxvi.) Some of these attitudes are, according to Hallett 1997, still to be found. For the questioning of the relevance of classical studies in America, cf. G. A. Kennedy 1980.1.

51 *Sexti Propertii Carmina*, ed. J. S. Phillimore (Oxford 1901), last page of the *Praefatio*.

52 In the case of Sappho’s reception, Joan DeJean 1989 even calls these versions fictions.

53 Cf. Sharrock’s concept of “womanufacture” in relation to the elegiac poet, Sharrock 1991.

approach (putting German scholarship into a modern framework) and through the utilisation of American moral standards, he has brought to life a type of Sulpicia that one might classify as a “Sulpicia Americana.” By constructing an innocent Sulpicia who writes only for herself or her beloved about her passion, Smith creates an antique parallel for the American poet Emily Dickinson, whose poems were published posthumously throughout the 1890s. Dickinson wrote passionate poems in the first person singular about her impossible love, but her passion remained unresolved in real life. And, like Smith’s Sulpicia, she did not publish her poetry. When one reads Smith’s Sulpicia it is therefore not surprising that she does not sound like Dorothy Parker’s Lesbia, who adamantly refuses to be “a tune to play” on Catullus’ pipe. Instead, she sounds like the tentative narrator in Dickinson’s “The Letter,” who writes, but then hides her love:

Going to Him! Happy letter!
 Tell Him—
 Tell Him the page I didn’t write—
 Tell Him I only said the Syntax—
 And left the Verb and the Pronoun out— . . .

Tell him just how she sealed you—Cautious!
 But—if He ask where you are hid
 Until tomorrow—Happy letter!
 Gesture Coquette—and shake your head!⁵⁴

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54 E. Dickinson, “The Letter,” 494, Version I, pp. 237–238, in *The Complete Poems*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber. 1986), ll. 1–5 and 22–25.

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