

SULPICIA'S SYNTAX

In the six remarkable *elegidia* transmitted in the Tibullan corpus as 3.13–18 (4.7–12) we appear to possess the writings of an educated Roman woman of aristocratic family and high literary connections:¹ a woman, moreover, who participates as an equal in one of the most distinguished artistic salons of the age,² and composes poetry in an obstinately male genre on the subject of her own erotic experience, displaying a candour and the exercise of a sexual independence startingly at odds with the ideology of her class. Such a figure is either, depending on one's viewpoint, too good to be true or too embarrassing to be tolerated. The case could easily be put that Sulpicia, more perhaps even than Sappho, has found her poems condemned by accident of gender to a century and a half of condescension, disregard, and wilful misconstruction to accommodate the inelastic sexual politics of elderly male philologists. Certainly even the most sympathetic of recent comment is prone to lapse into a form of critical language outlawed in Catullan scholarship thirty years ago.³ Yet feminist critics have been strangely cautious in their response. A scholar who rose swiftly to the defence of Erinna when that elusive poet's identity was impugned⁴ has notoriously written of Sulpicia:

¹ H. Harrauer, *A Bibliography to the Corpus Tibullanum* (Hildesheim, 1971), 59f. is supplemented by H. MacL. Currie, 'The Poems of Sulpicia', in *ANRW* II 30.3 (1983), 1751–64; H. Dettmer, 'The "Corpus Tibullanum" (1974–1980)', *ibid.* 1962–75; cf. also J. M. Fisher, 'The Life and Work of Tibullus', *ibid.* 1924–61: 1929. Add now the brief treatments in K. F. Quinn, *Texts and Contexts* (London, 1979), 189f.; G. Luck in E. J. Kenney and W. V. Clausen (edd.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (1982–5), ii.412; M. Lefkowitz and M. B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (London, 1982), 131–2; F. di Monaco, 'Adulescens poetria in litteris Latinis', *Vita Latina* 95 (1984), 24–6; A. D. Deyrmond, 'Sexual Initiation in the Woman's-Voice Court Lyric', in K. Busby (ed.), *Selected Proceedings of the Fifth Congress of the International Courtly Literature Society* (forthcoming). A. Cartault's racy, partisan survey of literature to 1906 (*A propos du "Corpus Tibullanum": un siècle de philologie latine classique*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté des Lettres 23, Paris, 1906) is still invaluable, especially pp. 563–4. The most important studies remain: O. F. Gruppe, *Die römische Elegie* (Leipzig, 1838), i.27–64; H. Belling, *Albius Tibullus* (2 vols., Berlin, 1897), 1–84; P. Rasi, *Una poetessa del secolo di Augusto* (Padua, 1913); K. F. Smith, *The Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (New York, 1913, reprinted Darmstadt, 1971), 77–87, 504–16; M. Schuster, 'Zu den Gedichten der Sulpicia', *Mitteilung des Vereins der Humanistischen Gymnasiums, Wien* 1 (1924), 19–29; G. Provasi, 'Il ciclo tibulliano Sulpicia-Cerinto e le sue principali interpretazioni', *RFIC* 15 (1937), 343–54; E. Bréguet, *Le Roman de Sulpicia* (Geneva, 1946); M. S. Santirocco, 'Sulpicia Reconsidered', *CJ* 74 (1979), 229–39; K. Ellerman, 'Sulpicia og hendes digte', *Museum Tusculanum* 48 (1982), 61–91; Currie, *art. cit.* Note also the translations of P. Dunlop in *Tibullus: The Poems* (Harmondsworth, 1972), 148–53; A. & W. Barnstone in *A Book of Women Poets: From Antiquity to Now* (New York, 1980), 57–9; J. Dillon (3.14, 16, 18 only) in C. Cosman, J. Keefe, & K. Weaver (edd.), *The Penguin Book of Women Poets* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 47–8.

² On the group of poets associated with Messalla Corvinus see R. Hanslik, 'Der Dichterkreis des Messalla', *Anzeiger der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien: Philologisch-historische Klasse* 89 (1952), 22–38, C. Davies, 'Poetry in the "Circle" of Messalla', *G&R* 20 (1973), 25–35; A. Valvo, 'M. Valerio Messalla Corvino negli studi più recenti', *ANRW* II 30.3 (1983), 1663–80: 1674ff.

³ 'Eager and vibrant verse...proud and passionate effusions of a Roman lady of flesh and blood... The content, tone and style speak firmly of reality, the reality of a young woman in love' (Currie, pp. 1753, 1758). See also the quotations in Santirocco, p. 230 n. 9, and Deyrmond, n. 8.

⁴ S. B. Pomeroy, 'Supplementary Notes on Erinna', *ZPE* 32 (1978), 17–21, responding to M. L. West, 'Erinna', *ibid.* 25 (1977), 95–119 (who finishes provocatively: 'What a pity such a gifted author had to conceal his name').

'She was not a brilliant artist: her poems are of interest only because the author is female.'⁵ Five years later, Sulpicia has found a place in the major sourcebook on ancient women,⁶ but with the cycle of poems violently reordered after the judgment of a nineteenth-century (male) critic, anxious to restore his poetess's chastity against the disconcerting frankness of the texts.⁷

Before 1838, opinion on the authorship of 3.8–18 of the *Corpus* fell broadly into three camps. Scaliger took all eleven elegies for the work of Tibullus, writing at times in the *persona* of Sulpicia;⁸ Barth first identified the author with the like-named poet of Domitian's time;⁹ while Heyne shrewdly suspected a diversity of unknown hands, with some of the first-person Sulpicia poems fostered on her by authors uncertain, perhaps including Tibullus, but others possibly the autograph work of Sulpicia herself.¹⁰ With Otto Gruppe's *Die römische Elegie* Heyne's cautious intuition was abruptly and brilliantly transformed into a consensus which has, with scarce exceptions, held the field ever since. Gruppe, struck by the discrepancy in scale and style between the short elegies 14–18 and the rest, identified two hands in the cycle. 8–13, limpid and accomplished, bore for Gruppe the stamp of a true poet, surely to be identified as Tibullus himself. But what of the five *elegidia* following? The key passage of Gruppe's argument, which has not always been fairly restated, deserves quoting in full.

True, they are metrically correct, yet at the same time they are little more. It is evident they come from no practised hand: the expression is awkward, the construction often put together only with difficulty. It is inconceivable that Tibullus could have written this way, even in a casual jotting; but it is thoroughly conceivable that an educated woman (Tibullus calls Sulpicia *docta puella*) would have expressed herself thus. We note a number of colloquialisms, such as *iam*; the subliterate character of many expressions; the obscurity of construction, especially in 3.16, where the words yield grammatical sense only under duress and the meaning is likewise uncertain. On close inspection the critic will readily recognise here a *feminine Latin*, impervious to analysis by rigorous linguistic method, but which finds natural, simple expressions for everyday ideas without conscious and artistic elaboration of style, and in which the sense is augmented and assisted by free *constructio ad sensum*. This distinctive element, already noted by one expert in Latinity, is nevertheless too involuntary and too consistently distributed over the whole to be explained away by textual corruption. Form and content, besides the most emphatic identification of the letter-writer by name, combine firmly to persuade us that in these five pieces, that can bring little credit to Tibullus, have survived after nearly two thousand years the love letters of a charming Roman girl of the Augustan age, exactly as she wrote them herself.¹¹

⁵ *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* (New York, 1975), 173.

⁶ Lefkowitz-Fant (above, n. 1); omitted in the earlier edition *Women in Greece and Rome* (Toronto, 1977).

⁷ J. H. Voss, *Albius Tibullus und Lygdamus, übersetzt und erklärt* (Tübingen, 1810), 317f.; still followed by Smith's commentary despite Cartault's spirited polemic (p. 84): 'La croyance à l'amour chaste provient du parti pris si longtemps prédominant en Allemagne de voir les choses antiques à travers la pudeur germanique et de considérer comme le devoir du philologue de sauver l'honneur des personnages dont il s'occupait'.

⁸ J. J. Scaliger, *Castigationes in Catullum, Tibullum, Propertium* (Paris, 1577), on 3.14.7 and 15.1.

⁹ Martial 10.35, 38; K. von Barth, *Adversariorum Commentariorum libri LX* (Frankfurt, 1624), lix.16, coll. 2811–2, followed in the edition of J. van Broekhuisen (Broukhuisius) (Amsterdam, 1708). The identification, long out of favour, was revived by L. Hermann, *L'Age d'argent doré* (Paris, 1951), 17–26.

¹⁰ C. G. Heyne, *Albii Tibulli quae extant carmina nouis curis castigata*³ (Leipzig, 1798), 201–3.

¹¹ Gruppe, *Die römische Elegie* 49–50.

Gruppe's concept of 'feminine Latin' remained in vogue for most of the century.¹² Teuffel restated Gruppe's case with textual instances to support Gruppe's more nebulous generalities:

The frequency of colloquialisms, especially *iam*, which occurs in all but 3.17; a general obscurity, awkwardness, and vagueness of expression; a lack of precision and clarity in thought or description, such as *propinque* (3.14.6); the omission of *me* (14.8); the expression *iter ex animo sublatus* (15.1); *nec opinanti* (15.4); the looseness of *de me permittis* (16.1); the lack of a firm definition of the logical relationship between parts of a sentence (16.3ff.); the meaningless 16.5f.; the plural *mea corpora* 17.2 (contrast Tibullus 1.9.73; 8.52); the knottily entangled lines 18.1ff.¹³

But French and Anglophone scholars were more sceptical, and even within Germany Gruppe's assumptions were early criticised.¹⁴ By the time of Smith's commentary the whole debate could be relegated to past tenses, and the discussion of Sulpicia's style has been regarded since as effectively closed.¹⁵

One has only to read Gruppe again to feel that his groundbreaking study has been pilloried for all the wrong reasons. 'Weibliche Latein' was a rash coinage, but – *pace* his critics – it was never Gruppe's intention to suggest that Roman women used a different subset of the language, although this is indisputably true, at a trivial level, in the unrelated field of Republican comedy.¹⁶ He meant rather that the translation of thought into expression in the Sulpician elegies displayed certain characteristics, not susceptible to grammatical analysis but nevertheless unmistakable to the romantic intuition, that bore the imprint of a female mind. Amongst such might be counted a tendency to spontaneous and artless expression, a certain obliquity of thought, and a refusal to be constrained by the rigours of masculine structures of logic and syntax. However quaint this may sound to-day, it is a notion which has persisted well into our century, even among scholars who dissociate themselves from any notion of 'feminine Latin'.¹⁷ In his central observation, at least, Gruppe is surely right: there

¹² E. Baehrens, *Tibullische Blätter* (Jena, 1876), 42; M. Schanz, *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur* (first edition, Munich 1890–1904), ii.116; F. Marx, 'Albius 12', *RE* I.1 (1893), coll. 1319–29; 1326–7.

¹³ W. S. Teuffel, *Studien und Charakteristiken zur griechischen und römischen, sowie zur deutschen Literaturgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1871), 366.

¹⁴ First by G. F. Hertzberg, *Hallische Jahrbücher für deutsche Wissenschaft und Kunst* 2 (1839), 1012; F. A. Rigler, *Annotationes ad Tibullum* (3 volumes, Potsdam, 1839–44; not listed by Harrauer), iii.35 ('Scribat aliter vir, aliter mulier: latinitas aut eadem est aut nulla: sexus ad eam nihil pertinet'); cf. Belling (above, n. 1), 70–2.

¹⁵ Two interesting exceptions are R. S. Radford, 'Tibullus and Ovid', *AJP* 44 (1923), 1–26, 230–59, 293–318, bent on proving Ovidian authorship of Sulpicia's poems along with everything else in book 3; Bréguet (above, n. 1), 43–55.

¹⁶ M. E. Gilleland, *Linguistic Differentiation of Character Type and Sex in the Comedies of Plautus and Terence* (Diss. University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1979); summary in *DA* 40 (1979), 3279A. Cicero testifies (*De Or.* 3.45) to a tendency to archaism in the spoken Latin of aristocratic women, at least in the previous generation; the distinction between archaism and colloquialism in first-century Latin is not always easy to draw, since Republican comedy constitutes our main body of test material for both.

¹⁷ So for instance Kirby Flower Smith's introduction, *op. cit.* (above, n. 1), 81: 'Irrespective however of training, of environment, or of any extraneous cause, 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 so difficult. 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

are some genuinely odd things about the language, syntax, and form of expression in these poems. If they cannot be explained, they deserve at least to be described if we are to form any idea of our poet's distinctiveness and the interest of her texts. Furthermore, however vague and subjective Gruppe's analysis of these stylistic trademarks, practically all scholars now accept the conclusion he drew from it: that 3.14–18 are the work of the historical Sulpicia, and that 3.8–12 are not. The current consensus adds only three codicils: most editors since Rossbach have detached 3.13 from the anonymous group and assigned it to Sulpicia herself;¹⁸ the Servius of 16.4 was convincingly identified by Haupt as a son of Cicero's Servius Sulpicius Rufus who married Messalla's sister Valeria, making Sulpicia herself an otherwise unknown niece of Messalla, possibly even his ward;¹⁹ and only a minority would now so confidently identify the shadowy *amicus Sulpiciae* of the Garland as Tibullus.

While these identifications seem, on balance, as secure as any in the prosopography of Augustan elegy, it is sobering to consider how haphazard has been the progress to the present consensus, and how vulnerable the assumptions on which it was first erected. Even if we allow Gruppe to have intuited the right answer from the wrong preconceptions, an abundance of related questions remains, to be addressed by those who believe them answerable. What is Sulpicia's personal status, and is she typical of her class? Who is the *auctor de Sulpicia* of 3.8–12, that enigmatic literary voyeur who contributes five fey elegies of frigid *doctrina* in the persons of Sulpicia and an unnamed friend?²⁰ Who is 'Cerinthus',²¹ and how much of the affair mapped in the eleven elegies is fantasy or generic fiction? Even if we can be confident that 3.13–18 are in fact the work of a single poet, can we be certain there was only one pseudepigraphic *auctor de Sulpicia*, or that Sulpicia herself, if she existed, ever set pen to paper in her own right? The critic's simplest course is to adopt the biography-

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 in 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.'

¹⁸ A. Rossbach, *Albii Tibulli libri quattuor* (Leipzig, 1855), vi, 55.

¹⁹ M. Haupt, 'Varia', *Hermes* 5 (1871), 32–4 = *Opuscula* (Leipzig, 1875–6), iii.502f.; cf. *PIR*¹ S739, and for the stemma *RE* IVA.1, coll. 879–80.

²⁰ S. C. Fredericks, 'A Poetic Experiment in the Garland of Sulpicia', *Latomus* 35 (1976), 761–82 usefully surveys the theories in n. 1.

²¹ The Cornutus addressed by Tibullus in 2.2.9, 2.3.1 remains an attractive identification, supported by the elegiac conventions of metrical equivalence and far-fetched Greek puns in the coinage of pseudonyms for the beloved. 2.2 celebrates Cornutus' marriage, allowing romantic biographers to identify the wife of line 11 with Sulpicia and this marriage with the happy consummation alluded to in Sulpicia's first elegy. Ancient provenance is unlikely for the variant reading *Cerinthe* in late manuscripts of 2.2.9, but recent work on the Caecili Cornuti has added interest to the Cornutus/Cerinthus hypothesis. C. Cichorius, *Römische Studien* (Leipzig and Berlin, 1922), 264 first identified the friend of Tibullus as the mysterious M. Caecilius Cornutus (*PIR*² C34) who was one of the first Augustan Arvales, alongside Messalla, in 21 B.C. (*CIL* vi. 32338). J. Scheid, *Les Frères arvales* (Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes: Section des Sciences Religieuses) 77 (Paris, 1975), 34–40 draws on the Cerinthus hypothesis for a speculative biography and reconstruction of the family stemma, in which Sulpicia acquires an intriguing political and literary marriage and becomes mother of the Arval of A.D. 14 (*CIL* vi.2023a, and see *PIR*² C35). The critic, however, will want to ask whether a planned marriage of this kind is easily understood from the Sulpicia elegies – the *Garland* perhaps more problematically than the *elegidia*. See also E. Groag, 'Caecilius 46', *RE* III.1 (1897), col. 1200, and cf. nos. 45 and 47; G. Howe, *Fasti sacerdotum P.R. publicorum aetatis imperatoriae* (Leipzig, 1904), 54 (no. 5); S. J. de Laet, *De Samenstelling van den Romeinischen Senaat* (Amsterdam, 1941), 31 (no. 67); M. W. Hoffman Lewis, *The Official Priests of Rome under the Julio-Claudians* (1955), 121 n. 5; R. Syme, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford, 1986), 47, 206; cf. id., *History in Ovid* (Oxford, 1978), 179 and n. 2, and *Some Arval Brethren* (Oxford, 1981), 2.

ical *façon de parler* in which the matter of the poems is for convenience discussed as though it were documentary, autobiographical, and historically factual, with the understanding implicit that no Roman elegy is fully any one of these things. But it must be acknowledged that the mask of Sulpicia was not exclusive property in the Messallan coterie, and that the circumstances of these poems leave much to be guessed.²²

The true damage done by Gruppe's hypothesis lies elsewhere. Read as poems, the Sulpician *elegidia* struck Gruppe as paltry affairs; but then to Gruppe's liberating reassessment, remaking the Augustan elegy with the critical tools of German romanticism, they should not be read as poems. Rather they are the spontaneous compositions of an amateur, a young girl dizzy with first love, and these writings are her actual documentary *Liebesbriefe*. This bizarre myth is so clearly born of its own historical moment that its persistence into the 1980s is all the more astonishing. If the love-letter part of the hypothesis has fallen from direct view, Gruppe's image of Sulpicia as an essentially artless, amateur poet is still widely invoked to apologise for stylistic oddities in the poems.²³ Santirocco has recently exposed the fallacies and circularities inherent in this assumption, which he identifies as arising from a combination of male preconception, the subordination of literary criticism to historical speculation, and the lingering contamination of romantic critical models.²⁴ As Santirocco's shrewd and sensitive reading shows, the poems respond quite differently to critical evaluation once the amateur hypothesis is suspended and the texts appraised in traditional terms.

Yet one question persists: why have so many readers felt that there is something not quite ordinary about the way Sulpicia writes? If her style seems different from the seasoned male poets we read alongside her, what are the differences, and why have they so often been seen as blemishes? Is the violent discrepancy in readers' assessment of these poems' merit attributable to the briefness and uniqueness of the *oeuvre*, to the impossible weight of biographical and sociological speculation in which their literary status has become entangled, or to some essential and irreducible strangeness in the texts themselves? The language and prosody of the poems have by now been thoroughly picked over without striking conclusion;²⁵ though to an extent the discussion has been skewed by the tendency of scholars to search for correlations outside the poems (Ovidian verse patterns, Tibullan turns of phrase) in preference to identifying recurrent patterns within the group. But aside from the often-noted, though ultimately insignificant, preponderance of colloquial idiom,²⁶ little has been offered in the field of syntax beyond a recurrent application of impressionistic terms such as 'obscure', 'difficult', 'imprecise'. What exactly is it that is obscure in Sulpicia? And can it help us towards a more balanced evaluation of the poems?

²² A sceptic might note that our poet seems suspiciously forthcoming with autobiographical identifiers. In the space of forty lines she thoughtfully informs us she is the young (18.3) daughter Sulpicia of a Servius (16.4) with property in Etruria (14.4), and that a Messalla is her kinsman and, in some manner, guardian (14.5–6). No doubt some of this can be justified as in the way of auctorial *sphragis*; but it is hard to be entirely confident of an author obliging enough to address her most distinguished relative, if the text is sound, as 'relative'.

²³ 'A sufficient explanation of these and similar peculiarities is mere inexperience in literary and metrical technique' (Smith, p. 81); 'It is the style of a writer who is not expert enough in the use of words to say what she wants to say without sacrifice of clarity' (Quinn, p. 190).

²⁴ art. cit. (above, n. 1), 238–9.

²⁵ In addition to the discussions of Radford and Bréguet (above, n. 15), see A. Cartault, *Le Distique élégiaque chez Tibulle, Sulpicia, Lygdamus*, Bibliothèque de la Faculté des Lettres 27 (Paris, 1911), esp. pp. 310–11.

²⁶ Most fully discussed by Smith, p. 81 and commentary; Bréguet, pp. 43–4.

A good showcase for the idiosyncrasies of Sulpician syntax is the last poem in our preserved arrangement, 3.18.

ne tibi sim, mea lux, aequae iam feruida cura
 ac uideor paucos ante fuisse dies,
 si quicquam tota commisi stulta iuuenta
 cuius me fatear paenituisse magis,
 hesternam quam te solum quod nocte reliqui
 ardorem cupiens dissimulare meum.

The poem is a single sentence, constructed of three couplets threaded together by a complex and at first bewildering web of multiple hypotaxis: 'May I not be as passionately desired by you as I seem to have lately been if I have ever done anything of which I can say I have been more repentant than the fact that I left you on your own last night seeking to dissimulate my own ardour.' The natural antiphonality of the elegiac distich and the sense-breaks at the end of the pentameter help to phrase the Latin more intelligibly to the ear than the English paraphrase, but the poem remains something of a contortionist performance in thought and syntax alike. The jussive main verb (*sim*) supports first a comparative clause (*aequae...ac*) with dependent complementary infinitive (*fuisse*); then a conditional protasis (*si...commisi*) in its turn supporting a relative clause (*cuius...fatear*) with *oratio obliqua* infinitive (*paenituisse*). This then introduces a comparative construction (*magis...quam*), whose second term is a substantival *quod*-clause, whose own verb (*reliqui*) then becomes the pendant for a participular clause occupying the final line.

This is not a one-off aberration; in fact, several features of these lines brand them unmistakably with the stamp of Sulpicia. These include the jussive and characteristic or potential subjunctives (cf. 3.13.5, 10, 14.5, 15.2, 16.3; 13.2, 14.3, 17.4, 5); the fondness for infinitives, especially perfect (cf. 13.1, 2, 6, 9, 10), as penultimate word in the pentameter (9 out of 20 couplets; also penultimate in the hexameter 13.1, 7, 9, 17.3, 5, and penultimate before caesura 13.2, 9); the focussing *iam* (14.5, 15.2, 16.1, and compare the force of *nunc* in 17.2), the generic *cura* (17.1; 16.3, with an apparent play in *securus* 1); the noun clause with *quod* introducing the prime situational *donnée* (16.1, 17.2); the highly idiosyncratic predilection for comparative constructions (13.1–2, 16.25–6, 17.3–4, and cf. the tmetictic *ante...quam* in 13.8) and elaborate conditionals (13.6, 17.4, 5).

But above all it is the sub-subordination of syntax that gives Sulpicia's expression its characteristic manner. Paradox (13.1–2, 9–10, 14.1, 7, 17.5–6) and conceit (13.5–6, 7–8, 14.7–8, 16.1–2, 5–6, 17.3–4) are no strangers to elegiac epigram, but Sulpicia deploys these jejune materials in a novel and vitalising way, using complications of syntax to which elegy is not normally hospitable to nest, embed, and interlock rhetorical ideas and build complex emotional puzzles out of restricted epigrammatic technique. Perhaps it is not surprising to find such an experiment in the Tibullan circle. We might see the Sulpician *elegidia* as attempting on the epigram scale what Tibullus explored more diffusely in his longer elegies: the elaboration of a complex inner state by dynamic recombination of a limited repertoire of familiar genre motifs.²⁷ In an analogous way, this intricate, finely-compacted little poem spins a web of complex subjectivity from a network of interconnecting feelings and ideas. The facts of the case emerge only in the final distich, drawing a paradoxical relation between the objective act (last night she abandoned her lover) and subjective motivation (not because she

²⁷ This distinctive Tibullan technique is famously analysed in G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford, 1968), 495–505.

did not desire him, but for the opposite reason: because she wanted to disguise the intensity of her desire). The superb four-word pentameter punchline leaves much suggested, little stated; it is left for the reader to supply from experience and human knowledge the inner motive for such contradictory outward behaviour. But by the time we reach this revelation we have already felt the emotional hangover, as the poet (ostensibly) reviews her idiot action the morning after in the light of the recent progress of the affair. From the telling *fervida* and *paucos* together we infer it has been going uncharacteristically well, and the unspoken implication is that now she has ruined it all. Hence the passionate self-criticism of 3–4, placing the action in the context of a perceived history of immaturity and *stultitia*, and the bitter recognition of the probable and deserved consequences.²⁸

In this light, the poem's syntactic convolutions seem anything but artless. Far from a rambling amateur gush, the poem bears the marks of conscious, almost obsessive articulation of form. Its single sentence spans four moments of experience – the poem-present of *iam* (1), the immediate past of *hesterna...nocte* (5), the short-term past of *paucos ante...dies* (2), and the long-term past of *tota...iuventa* (3) – and these four time-levels are nested in a syntactic structure of remarkable symmetrical elaboration. The top-level condition *ne...sim...si...commisi* links two comparative constructions, the first (*aeque...ac*) setting present against short-term past while the second (*magis...quam*) links immediate and long-term retrospects. The two durational pasts are guardedly recognised through the personal present (*uideor...fuisse* answered by *fatear...paenituisse*), and *quicquam...quod* locates the immediate past of the previous night as an aorist closing both into perfected action. Each verse completes a clause, the first three progressively broadening the temporal retrospective and the final three narrowing the aspectual focus again on a single preterite moment. Each pentameter holds a penultimate infinitive governed by an affective first-person verb of elegantly varied mood and progressive confessional intensity; and their successive structure gives subtle formal support to the overall focussing effect, moving from six words to five to four with diminishing hyperbaton each time. Only in one notable respect is 3.18 atypical of its set: it is the only piece with significant syntactic overrun between couplets. Contextual placement is surely important here: the least playful of the six pieces, it follows two accusatory pieces directed at Cerinthus, and punctuates the sudden mood of self-criticism with the only direct address of endearment in the cycle. Arranged at the end of the whole sequence its effect is all the more striking, the measured periods and continual twists of thought and syntax evoking a new introspective solemnity after the regularly stopped couplets of its predecessors.

Nevertheless, the major techniques of 3.18 are highly characteristic of the cycle as a whole. Consider our poem's immediate predecessor, 3.17 in the Tibullan corpus: a less instantly attractive piece that still glitters with Sulpician quirks.

estne tibi, Cerinthe, tuae pia cura puellae,
quod mea nunc uexat corpora fessa calor?
a ego non aliter tristes euincere morbos
optarim, quam te si quoque uelle putem.
at mihi quid prosit morbos euincere, si tu
nostra potes lento pectore ferre mala?

The scenario is economically set out: she is sick, he perhaps shows less solicitude than she might wish, and the stage is set for another tangled Propertian charade of guilt fantasy and emotional blackmail. The first distich delivers the charge in calculatedly

²⁸ It is not always easy to tell whether a main-verb subjunctive in Sulpicia is jussive or potential in force; see further on 3.13 below.

loaded terms, the hexameter baldly accusing Cerinthus of unfeeling neglect (note especially the slyly Catullan appeal to the language of *pietas*) and the pentameter locating the circumstances in another loosely attached *quod*-clause that allows an artful switch from third person to first. Next, the central conceit, couched in typically contorted syntax: If I thought you cared so little, I had rather stay sick. The *aliter...quam* construction in which the condition is bedded is wholly characteristic of our author: instead of saying 'I would not wish to recover if I thought you did not share the wish', we have 'I would not wish to recover otherwise than if I thought you also wanted'. The twist is significant: Sulpicia's imagination constantly takes the form of a gap between opposed worlds of possibility, vividly summoned and chosen between, and the explicit comparison here adds flesh, and ironic substance, to the absurd possibility that Cerinthus does not want his mistress to get well. As in poem 18, the forced collaboration of comparison, condition, and subordinate infinitives builds a Chinese-box structure of ideas from the syntactic interplay of external and subjective elements in the situation. The unpleasantness of her condition (*tristes*), the possibility of recovery (*euincere*), her own wishes (*optarim*), Cerinthus' imagined wishes (*te...uelle*), her second-order response to that image (*putem*, completing the syntactic superstructure) are sequentially nested within the scope of a single couplet, each new term in the sequence framing its predecessors within a further shift of perspective. Finally the paradox is querulously reformulated in terms that more closely echo the interrogative opening, with the mood of the condition sliding subtly closer to fact.²⁹ The careful patterning of pronouns, the chiasmic echo of *euincere morbos*, the artful variations of enjambment all testify once again to a shrewder awareness of form than might be expected from a mere teenage dabbler, however *docta*.

Poem 16 has long been acknowledged the most difficult elegy of the six, and a lingering Edwardian primness over its content has not helped interpretation of the Latin.

gratum est, securus multum quod iam tibi de me
permittis, subito ne male inepta cadam.
sit tibi cura togae potior pressumque quasillo
scortum quam Servi filia Sulpicia:
solliciti sunt pro nobis, quibus illa dolori est
ne cedam ignoto maxima causa toro.

A literal rendering may help to set the problems in order: 'I am grateful that you cheerfully allow yourself plenty of freedom now concerning myself, lest in my unfortunate naivety I suddenly fall. Let care for a toga and a whore encumbered by a basket be more to you than Sulpicia daughter of Servius. They are worried for us, to whom that is the greatest grounds for sorrow, that I may not give way to an obscure bed.' The usual understanding is that Cerinthus has been entertaining himself with a woman of low status,³⁰ a *quasillaria* or spinning-girl. This presumably is the liberty with which he is sarcastically credited in the opening couplet. But what does the rest of the pentameter mean, why should Sulpicia be grateful, and what on earth is the last couplet about?

The first difficulty is *cadam*. Smith followed J. H. Voss and the nineteenth-century consensus in viewing poem 13 in our arrangement as the latest of the cycle and celebrating the final happy consummation of a hitherto aphysical relationship, and

²⁹ Strictly, the mood of *prosit* is deliberative within an indicative condition: R. Kühner & C. Stegmann, *Ausführliche Grammatik der Lateinischen Sprache*³ (Leipzig, 1955), ii.392, §213(b).

³⁰ The toga is of course the girl's, a badge of her inferior rank; the translations of Dunlop and the Barnstones curiously give it to Cerinthus.

would interpret line 2 along the lines 'lest in my misplaced naivety I surrender my virtue too suddenly':

The evident sphere and significance of *cadere* here are perfectly familiar in popular English and might be abundantly illustrated from our old plays, ballads, and songs. It is therefore the more surprising to find that in Latin this example is practically unique... This use of *cadere* – which is 'tumble' (cp. e.g. Ophelia's song) rather than 'fall' – is doubtless popular and possibly more or less characteristic of feminine usage.³¹

But for this meaning there is only the isolated parallel of Plautus, *Persa* 656, and in the absence of contextual cues it is scarcely a natural sense here. Santirocco prefers 'fall in love', but this is even less possible Latin, and it seems hard, especially after *male inepta*, to avoid the *prima facie* meaning 'make a mistake'.³² Yet it is hard to see what sudden mistake on Sulpicia's part can be averted by the knowledge of Cerinthus' misdeeds; the emphasis may be meant to fall on *subito* or *inepta* rather than on the verb itself, but whether the suggestion is a comparable infidelity on Sulpicia's side or a misjudgment in her relations with Cerinthus remains, perhaps intentionally, ambiguous.

Interpretation of the poem as a whole depends largely on the text and implication of the final couplet. Smith, understanding the *solliciti* to be potential rivals for Sulpicia's affections, translates 'there are those interested in our behalf whose greatest cause for concern is the fear lest I may be slighted for a base-born paramour', and rejects the alternative 'lest I may yield to, i.e. be persuaded into, an obscure marriage' on the good grounds that a social difference between Sulpicia and Cerinthus is hardly credible.³³ The manuscripts' *credam*, however, has recently been defended by Ellerman, who would interpret 'that I should not put my trust in a relationship whose status I can no longer be sure of'.³⁴ But this puts unacceptable strain on *ignotus*, and no easy sense with *credam* seems available. The thought seems built round an elaborate contrast in the first and last couplets between the carelessness of Cerinthus and the involvement of the *solliciti*. 'I'm glad you feel sufficiently at ease to take liberties with my trust; at least now I won't make any foolish, headlong mistakes (?). Stick with your mistress from the gutter – there are some people who, apparently unlike you, do care enough about me to be outraged at such a slight to me.' The pointed echo, noted by Santirocco, between *ne...cadam* in 2 and *ne cedam* in 6 is part of a wider symmetry: *securus* and *de me* answered by *solliciti...pro nobis*, and the intention rhetorically attributed to Cerinthus in *ne...cadam* countered by the intention of the others *ne cedam*.

As elsewhere, the density and difficulty of these lines are largely attributable to Sulpicia's convoluted hypotaxis. Each couplet knots together three obliquely-expressed ideas, their poetic interrelation conveyed by precise syntactic subordination rather than by the loose, suggestive parataxis more characteristic of elegy and of

³¹ K. F. Smith, op. cit. 513.

³² So the translations of Dunlop and Fant, perhaps hedging their bets. The *OLD* lists this occurrence of *cadere*, alongside Propertius 2.3.2, under 2f 'to be brought down (from a position of eminence)'.

³³ Virgil (*G.* 4.63) alludes to the plant *cerintha* (honeywort) as *ignobile gramen*, but botanical symbolism in the name (J. P. Boucher, 'A propos de Cérintus et de quelques autres pseudonymes dans la poésie augustéenne', *Latomus* 35 (1976), 504–19) seems improbable. If Cerinthus is M. Caecilius Cornutus (see above, n. 21), his family background scarcely warrants the slur *ignotus*, though he is a surprising figure to find rubbing consular shoulders among the Arvales. The epithet in Virgil has not been convincingly explained: see J. Sargeant, *The Trees, Shrubs, and Plants of Virgil* (Oxford, 1920), 30–1.

³⁴ Ellerman, art. cit. (above, n. 1), 75–9.

epigram in general. In two of the three couplets verbs are clause-stacked three deep.³⁵ Once again a more or less generic situational core twists off into an intricate network of interlocked conceits, developing a central ironic idea through a web of secondary and tertiary implication. The threads traverse a range of themes already emerging as Sulpician hallmarks: sexual manoeuvring, betrayal and backlash, ironies of guilt, traps for inexperience, the watching world and its judgment. Whether these reflect a feminisation of thought or subject-matter must be open to debate.³⁶ Undoubtedly this is a poem of considerable ambition and complexity; but the reader must decide whether in this case the thought is too compacted, the frenetic intellectual agility too self-defeating, for the result to be judged 'successful'.

By contrast, the pair of light epigrams on the poet's birthday (3.14–15) is virtually free of hypotaxis, and almost disappointingly unscarred by the rococo flourishes of thought and syntax that mark her expression elsewhere.

inuisus natalis adest, qui rure molesto
et sine Cerintho tristis agendus erit.
dulcius urbe quid est? an uilla sit apta puellae
atque Arretino frigidus amnis agro?
iam, nimium Messalla mei studiose, quiescas:
non tempestiuae saepe, propinque, uiae.
hic animum sensusque meos abducta relinquo,
arbitrio quamuis non sinis esse meo.

scis iter ex animo sublatum triste puellae?
natali Romae iam licet esse suo.
omnibus ille dies nobis natalis agatur,
qui necopinanti nunc tibi forte uenit.

The vexed final couplet of 14 seems to turn on a strained terminological quibble distinguishing *animus* and *sensus* from *arbitrium* ('Borne away, I leave my mind and feelings here – although you will not allow me the use of my judgment'), but it would probably be kinder to obelise.³⁷ There may be a teasing undercurrent to 15.4 ('perhaps you were already making other plans'), but it practically vanishes if we take *forte* more logically as 'by a stroke of chance'. The paradoxical wit – my birthday is *inuisus* and *tristis*, you did not know it was coming – is merely facetious, and the poems' chief interest lies in the glimpse of tensions, however lightly presented, arising from the Roman *uirgo*'s social dependence on her guardian. Biographical criticism is inevitably stimulated by this gentle reproach: is Messalla aware of his niece's feelings in the matter? How would he deal with her straining after independence in love? Is the poem for his eyes, or for Cerinthus, if either? But there seems no way to answer these questions even if we count them meaningful.

Poem 3.13, on the other hand, might almost have been written for Sulpicia's latter-day biographers, who ironically have themselves thwarted its message by an almost mischievous inversion of its context.

tandem uenit amor, qualem texisse pudori
quam nudasse alicui sit mihi fama magis.
exorata meis illum Cytherea Camenis
attulit in nostrum deposuitque sinum.

³⁵ The transmitted text *dolori est* should surely be retained in line 5; the strange predicative dative with *causa* is closely supported by the construction with *fama* in 13.1–2.

³⁶ One 'feminine' effect in the poems' cumulative texture may be that of the 27 verbs of which Sulpicia herself is the subject only four are indicative, and two of those (18.3, 5) refer to the same act; while no fewer than 24 verbs are used impersonally or with abstract or hypothetical subjects.

³⁷ The paradoxism with *sinit* is only preserved by the ugly reading *quam uis*, first proposed in the edition of Achilles Statius (Venice, 1567), and surprisingly endorsed in Postgate's text.

exoluit promissa Venus: mea gaudia narret,
 dicitur si quis non habuisse sua.
 non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis,
 me legat ut nemo quam meus ante, uelim:
 sed peccasse iuuat, uultus componere famae
 taedet: cum digno digna fuisse ferar.

The persistent and insidious dogma that the poems are spontaneous epistolary documents of actual and immediate experience has driven scholars from Voss to Currie to reorder the MSS sequence in what they believe to be the true sequence of the affair as documented. As 3.13 contains several oblique hints and one unmistakable assertion of carnal intimacy between Sulpicia and her beloved, it represented for Voss the final consummation of a chaste, if stormy, courtship, in the happy bonds of Roman wedlock. The Cerinthus/Cornutus identification made this speculation the more attractive, since Cornutus is described as recently married in Tibullus 2.2. But aside from the eccentric readings of 16 and 18 which this view has generated, it is directly contradicted by the opening words (which can only with difficulty be wrenched to mean 'at last my love has been reciprocated/consummated/solemnised'), and seriously eroded by the transmitted arrangement of the poems, in which it seems perverse to deny a deliberate narrative sequence. An exuberant announcement of the start of the affair is succeeded by a pair of light-spirited *pièces d'occasion* unclouded by emotional complication, then three darker pieces on moments of flaw in the relationship, sliding from accusatory sarcasm through a more measured balance of blame and self-pity to culminate in a deprecatory outburst of pure self-recrimination, renouncing immaturity and reannouncing desire in language of a new and transforming seriousness. It is surely poem 18, not 13, which asks to be seen as the culmination of the affair, and in its depth, implication, and maturity of emotional insight ought to present the diehard romantic biographer with a happy ending for his Augustan lovebirds more realistic, and perhaps more optimistic, than the consummation traditionally supposed.

Nevertheless, poem 13 stands as a powerful and programmatic introduction to the sextet. The first couplet, indeed, is a showpiece of Sulpician mannerisms, slithering off after three forthright words of uncharacteristic lucidity into a syntactic morass in which the relative *qualem* is governed by the infinitival pair *texisse magis quam nudasse* as compound object of an extraordinary double dative with *fama*. 'Love has come at last, of such a kind the reputation to have concealed which would be more for a shame to me than (the reputation) to have exposed (it) to someone.' If the perfect infinitives sound harsh and awkward, the poet at least is unrepentant, for there are three more to come, two of them governed as here by semantically passive constructions of indirect discourse. What is the poem up to? Should we blame amateur technique, distaff Latin, or characteristically feminine patterns of thought?³⁸

Santirocco has already drawn attention to the close relation between syntax and meaning: 'The poem is not just about love but also about reputation... the gratuitous indirect discourse with its emphasis on *what is spoken* resonates with the theme'.³⁹ Santirocco recognises that the repetition of *fama* is thematic, denoting not only 'that "gossip" earned by her lifestyle but also, since she broadcasts it, that "fame" earned

³⁸ So Smith on 7–8: '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 distych, which constitutes the real difficulty of the first sentence, and which a man probably would not have used'.

³⁹ Santirocco, p. 235; cf. Ellerman, pp. 69–70.

by her poetry'.⁴⁰ In fact, it is the relationship between these two terms that constitutes the poem's dynamic. The whole poem is about discourse, a series of loosely interlocked paradoxes and conceits on the theme of *being talked about* in its multiple guises and implications. On the one hand, Sulpicia wants to shout her love from the rooftops; on the other, she is bound to avoid public talk of her affair to avoid damage to her moral reputation. To reconcile these opposed forces, *fama* itself must be subject to refinement and to control. The former process is already underway in the first couplet: in typically forceful paradox, she dictates a relationship between *fama* and *pudor* that drives a wedge between the meanings 'talk' and 'reputation'. To be talked of as not having talked (an elegant *impossibile*) would shame Sulpicia more than to be talked of as having talked, because in her personal redefinition of the morality of discourse the act itself is untouched by shame. It is only the talk of it that is potentially damaging, and if she can control that discourse she can invert the attendant reputation. The major syntactic elements of this distich are thus essential to articulation of the sense: the characteristic relative with *qualis* to define the special essence of this *amor*; the loose *pudori*... *fama* to dictate the separation of these terms; the comparative to oppose and judge between the key thematic terms in the poem.

Even the strange-looking perfects serve a poetic function, introducing a temporal and aspectual motif of some delicacy. The subjective moment of the poem's consciousness is suspended between the act and the discourse, looking back to the consummation itself and forward to the time when word of it gets out. The meaning of the act is only fixed and reified once it becomes spoken of as having taken place; hence lines 1b–2, and in a different way 6, look forward to a time when discourse crystallises and the act acquires an interpretative veneer of *fama*. But in the final couplet the infinitives are true perfects, not contextualised as future perfects. Sulpicia gives her judgment on the act in present time – *peccasse iuuat*, another fine paradox – and activates the onset of *fama* in her own terms, subjecting it both to refinement (by subverting the moral judgment attaching, *cum digno digna fuisse*) and to control (by delivering the hitherto coyly hinted-at tidbit of gossip on her own terms in her own poem). 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.

The formal artistry of this remarkable poem is closer to Catullan epigram than to any of the Augustan elegists. The first couplet functions as a formal and thematic heading to the rest, *tandem...amor* developed further in 3–5a and *qualem...magis* from 5b to the end. The second couplet introduces the theme of poetry to the first half of the equation: Sulpicia has won her lover through poetry, and as we shall see, it is through poetry that she engineers release from the dilemma of *fama*. The language is teasing and elusive: love has come at last, Venus has deposited him (who? love, lover, or a fusion of both?) in her bosom, she has fulfilled her promise. Then a new twist: anyone short of experience of his own to gossip about is welcome to appropriate Sulpicia's. This dance of hypotheticals is aptly choreographed by the poem's sly play of subjunctives. The jussive *narret* is, grammatically at least, apodotic to an open future condition, leaving it still uncertain whether she intends to commit her sins to *fama*. Similarly the *sit* in 2 could be read with potential force as well as characteristic: the only indicatives have been the string of perfects referring back to the affair itself. The mischievous mood continues in 7–8: with a potentialising *uelim* governing the

⁴⁰ Santirocco 234.

thought, she toys with the idea of committing her love to poetry, and draws back with the reflection that the private nature of the affair should entitle her lover alone to the privileged discourse of *fama*. Only in 9, with an elegantly elliptic *sed* to mark the moment of decision, do the present indicatives come out, in a burst of almost capricious impersonalised subjectivity: *iuuat*, *taedet*, it pleases me, it bores me. Then the punchline, appropriating in Catullan spirit the morally loaded vocabulary of Roman propriety to an ironically improper context, with the first non-contingent jussive – or is it even a future indicative? – to seal the poem and her own *fama* with it.

What kind of profile of our poet emerges from this encounter? Again and again the syntactic mannerisms that have been blamed on amateurism or gender have emerged, on closer inspection, as essential instruments of expression for an agile and distinctive poetic imagination. The old catechism of patronising epithets – ‘spontaneous’, ‘heartfelt’, ‘passionate’ – looks increasingly bankrupt; if Sulpicia has a failing, it is if anything an excess of intellectual control. Ideas and feelings find themselves crammed, with the precision of an algebraic formula, into strange hypotactic niches and relentlessly ingenious sleights of human logic. Such poetry is not easy to evaluate. But it perhaps needs stressing that Sulpicia’s generic affinities lie more with the Hellenistic-neoteric epigram, and especially with the elegiac poems of Catullus, than with the Augustan love elegists of her circle. Yet her verse technique, her fondness for intellectual conceit and paradox look ahead in general spirit if not in narrow detail to that youthful hanger-on of the Messallan coterie whose hand has so often been seen in other poems of the *Corpus*,⁴¹ and who was in the next generation to extend and harmonise the slick irony and formal virtuosity of Sulpician epigram to the annihilation of Augustan elegy and the wilful subversion of every surviving poetic genre in Latin. Perhaps, after all, Sulpicia is not such a minor figure.

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⁴¹ Lygdamus: first by Gruppe, *Die römische Elegie* i.105–43; later discussions reviewed by Fisher, art. cit. (above, n. 1), 1927 n. 14. *Auctor de Sulpicia*: Bréguet, pp. 333–8. The whole of book 3: R. S. Radford, art. cit. (above, n. 15).