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**Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook**  
Bonnie MacLachlan

**Greek and Roman Sexualities: A Sourcebook**  
Jennifer Larson

# Women in Ancient Rome

*A Sourcebook*

Bonnie MacLachlan

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There was no guard, no door to keep out the sad lovers;  
 if it is right, I pray that this way of life return!"  
 (2.3.69–74)

In the fifth poem of this book, the poet-lover is explicit about the vital role Nemesis played in his artistry.

"I celebrate Nemesis in my songs continually; without her none of my verses  
 can find words or appropriate rhythm."  
 (2.5.111–12)

### SULPICIA

Attached to the manuscripts containing the poetry of Tibullus are six short poems ascribed to a female elegist, Sulpicia – a rare testimony to the literary activity of Roman women alluded to indirectly by male poets. The soldier and literary patron Messalla was Sulpicia's uncle and became her guardian after the death of her father. She was doubtless influenced by the poetic activity of others in Messalla's circle – not only Tibullus but Ovid. Her work has been admired for its straightforward simplicity and candour but also for its polish. Although like Propertius and Tibullus she is self-referential as both a lover and a poet, some elegies are framed as correspondence with her lover Cerinthus (likely a pseudonym) or as notes from a diary. The 45 verses that remain are assigned to the fourth book of some editions of the Tibullan collection (numbers 7–12, following a division of the third book in the 15th century), but the references below reflect their place in the third book, as used in the digital library Perseus and in the Loeb edition.

The following poem of Sulpicia's celebrates her new love affair, one that she is determined not to conceal, despite its violation of the norms expected of a young woman with her pedigree.

"At last love has come, such a love that a report that I had concealed it  
 would have brought me more shame than had I laid it bare to someone.  
 Venus, much entreated in my verses, has brought him  
 to my breast and laid him there.  
 Venus has kept her promise: let some person tell of my bliss  
 if s/he has had none of his/her own.  
 I could wish that I didn't [have to] send anything in sealed tablets  
 to avoid someone reading it before my lover.  
 But it delights me to have transgressed: to compose my appearance for a good  
 name is offensive;

I will be spoken of as one who has been proper in taking a man equally  
 proper."  
 (3.13)

The next pair of poems appears to document some drama surrounding Sulpicia's birthday, provoking the poet's resistance to her uncle's control.

"My detestable birthday is at hand, which must be spent in the stupid countryside,  
 a miserable one without Cerinthus.  
 What is lovelier than the city? Is a country estate fit for a girl,  
 or a chilly river on the Arrentine plain?  
 Now, Messalla, do relax. You are quite too solicitous for me;  
 the roads are often not seasonable, uncle, for travelling.  
 If I am dragged away I leave behind my mind and my heart  
 to the degree to which it cannot occur as I wish."  
 (3.14)

Sulpicia succeeds, and the companion poem is addressed to Cerinthus.

"Do you know that the journey has been lifted from your girl's morose heart?  
 Now she can be in Rome for her birthday!  
 May that day of my birth be celebrated by us all,  
 the event which now comes your way perhaps contrary to expectation."  
 (3.15)

The following poetic epistle to Cerinthus was composed in quite a different mood, demonstrating a witty combination of fury and pride. (The word *toga* here signifies the dress of a woman of low repute, one who like a prostitute was obliged to wear this brief garment rather than the matron's *stola*.)

"Thanks, for permitting yourself to be completely unconcerned about me  
 lest suddenly I tumble badly, in my silly way.  
 Let your attention be drawn rather to a toga, and a wench burdened with her wool  
 basket  
 rather than for Sulpicia, daughter of Servius.  
 There are people worried about me, whose greatest cause for concern on our  
 account  
 is that I might give way to a bed-mate of low account."  
 (3.16)

In the following elegy the poet is ill, and appeals to Cerinthus for attention.

"Is it in you, Cerinthus, to show due concern for your mistress  
 since at this moment a fever agitates my feeble limbs?  
 I would not wish to get over miserable illnesses  
 unless I thought that you too wished me to do so.  
 But what good would it do me to get over my sickness  
 if you are able to put up with my troubles with an unfeeling heart?"  
 (3.17)

In the final poem of Sulpicia's that we possess, she takes some responsibility for a rift between them.

"Now, my darling, don't let me be such a passionate trouble for you  
 as I feel myself to have been a few days ago.  
 If ever I have done anything foolish in my entire youth  
 for which I might confess that I have had more cause to repent  
 it was the fact that last night I left you behind on your own,  
 wanting to hide my ardent desire from you."  
 (3.18)  
 (Sulpicia, *Elegies* as transmitted through the poetic collection of Tibullus)

## OVID

The poet who was regarded in antiquity as the last to compose Latin Love Elegy was Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid). He adopted and adapted motifs of his forbears such as the narrator describing himself as a slave to both a domineering mistress and to love. For Ovid the mistress was Corinna, whose name (like Catullus' Lesbia) was derived from a female Greek poet. Often the lover-poet in Ovid's elegies appears to be deliberately adopting the passive, subordinate role, but contradictory poses within the same poem suggest that Ovid is exposing this as a rhetorical ruse. In some of the elegies we find a transparent invitation to the mistress to deceive her husband, and even a conversation with the husband about his potential to act as a pimp for his wife. This, together with other poems normalizing adultery, likely led to Ovid's incurring the resolute opposition of Augustus, who sent him into exile on the shores of the Black Sea in 8 CE. He died nine years later and was buried there, in modern Romania.

One of Ovid's elegies that addresses his mistress and encourages her to ignore the emperor's attempts to enforce marital fidelity is the fourth poem in the first book of his *Amores* ("Loves"), where the lover plans to be at a dinner-party with his mistress and her husband.

"Your husband is going to come to the same dinner as we are –  
 may that be the last meal for that man of yours, I pray!  
 So am I to gaze at my beloved girl merely as a fellow dinner-guest?  
 The one who has the pleasure of being touched – will it be another man?  
 Will you warm the breast of another, leaning close to him?  
 Will that man throw his arm around your neck whenever he wants?"  
 (1.4.1–6)

He gives instructions to his mistress to give secret indications of her devotion to him.

"Learn all the same what you must do, and don't give my words  
 to the East Wind to be carried away, nor to the warm South Wind!  
 Come before your husband does – although I don't see what advantage there is  
 if you arrive before him; nonetheless, come earlier.  
 When he lies down on the couch and you come as his companion with a modest  
 demeanour  
 to lie beside him – secretly touch me with your foot!  
 Watch me and my nods and the words caught by my expression;  
 catch my secret signals and return them yourself.  
 With my brows I will say words that speak without making a sound;  
 you will read words traced by my fingers, words traced in wine.  
 When the wantonness of our love-play comes to your mind  
 touch your flushed cheeks with your soft thumb.  
 If there is something about me of which you disapprove silently in your mind  
 let your hand gently dangle near the tip of your ear.  
 When what I do or say pleases you, my darling,  
 let your ring be twisted around and around with your finger."  
 (1.4.11–26)

In the fifth poem of the first book of the *Amores*, Ovid describes an afternoon of lovemaking between the poet-lover and his mistress. The focus is on the narrator's desire, aroused by gazing upon various parts of her body.

"It was sultry, and the day had passed beyond its midpoint;  
 I laid my limbs out to rest in the middle of my bed.  
 Part of my window was open, the other part closed;  
 the light was almost like that commonly found in the woods,  
 like dusk glowing dimly when the sun is retiring,  
 or when night has departed but day has not yet risen.  
 The light was such as should be offered to bashful girls