Despite recent critical interest in Statius’ *Thebaid*, Statius’ *Silvae*, his four books of short poems written chiefly in praise of patrons living in the age of Domitian, have been derided for their ‘mannerist style’ and, in particular, for their seeming adulation of Domitian.\(^1\) In a sense, the *Silvae* have shared in the posthumous condemnation of Domitian, for the hostile tradition about this emperor propagated by the influential writings of Pliny and Tacitus has caused Statius’ poems to be viewed as the decadent product of a decadent regime. But the *Silvae* are works of Statius’ maturity, written largely after the completion of his *Thebaid*.\(^2\) Moreover, along with the epigrams of Martial, Statius’ *Silvae* are our only contemporary witnesses to the age of Domitian. Since they describe its monuments, its entertainments, its households, and its court, the *Silvae* are important social as well as literary productions. They deserve reconsideration for what they reveal about imperial topography, art, and ceremonial, as well as about social and political conditions. Significantly too, these poems give voice to the hopes, desires, and anxieties of an age in which government took on the dramatically new face of a divine monarchy.

Indeed, the *Silvae* are worth careful investigation for the insight they offer into the conditions of speech under imperial autocracy. Although he encouraged the arts, the emperor Domitian seems to have actively suppressed free speech, particularly towards the end of his reign—the period in which the *Silvae* were published.\(^3\) If we ascribe some value to Tacitus’ remark at the start of the *Agricola* that

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\(^1\) The term ‘mannerist’ was given currency in literary criticism by Curtius (1953) 273–301. On its applicability to Statius, see Vessey (1973) 7–14; Vessey (1986b) 2757–60.

\(^2\) The first collection of the *Silvae*, comprising books 1–3, was published in 93 ce; book 4 was published separately in 95 ce, and book 5 was published posthumously. The *Thebaid* was published around 92 ce. On the dating of the publication of the *Silvae*, see Coleman (1988) xvi–xx.

the most dangerous kind of literature in Domitian’s Rome was panegyric (1–2), then the Silvae are obvious poems through which to explore the social function of praise poetry in an autocratic age. They are a key witness to the political ideology of Flavian Rome and to the poet’s complex relationship with imperial power.

In Silvae 1.6 the poet describes a public celebration, the entertainment—gifts, a banquet, and spectacular shows—provided by the emperor for the people on the occasion of the Saturnalia. Here for the first time in the Silvae Statius brings the emperor himself into the public arena, where his power is displayed not in a colossal statue, as in Silvae 1.1, but in his social interactions with his people. The amphitheatre itself, which may well have been the Colosseum, is not described. The idea of the emperor is examined here through spectacle rather than through architecture.

Statius’ Silvae have generally fallen into the opposing categories of either flattery or subversion. I wish to approach Silvae 1.6, however, with the assumption that Statius’ praise of Domitian here is neither servile nor feigned. In Silvae 1.6 Domitian is presented largely from the point of view of the audience, who enthusiastically respond to him in the complementary roles of benefactor and god. Yet the wonder and awe that Domitian engenders in his audience also points to the ambiguity inherent in a power that transgresses human norms. This ambiguity is part of a larger response to the increasing autocracy of Domitian’s government and the expansion of the imperial office into a divine monarchy.

In particular, Silvae 1.6 explores the imperial appropriation of the discourse of popular liberty. Domitian’s games, so we are told, celebrate the Saturnalia. Thus Silvae 1.6 uses two politically, highly charged occasions—the games and the Saturnalia—to scrutinise the ideology of divine kingship on which Domitian based his rule, in particular the ‘divine’ right the emperor assumes at the Saturnalian feast to

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1 Likewise Martial’s Liber de Spectaculis, written to celebrate the inaugural games in the Colosseum, focusses on the entertainment, not on the amazing new building. The seventh Eclogue of Calpurnius Siculus, on the other hand, uses the architecture of the amphitheatre as a metaphor for imperial power.

2 This is most clearly illustrated by the opposing interpretations of Silvae 1.1 offered by Ahl (1984a) 91–102 and Geyssen (1996) passim.

3 As Millar (1977) 3 observes, the transformation of the emperor from princeps to Hellenistic king was not interrupted by ‘good’ emperors such as Trajan or Marcus Aurelius.