CHAPTER 3

The Silvae: Poetics of Impromptu and Cultural Consumption

Gianpiero Rosati

A Fluid, Warm Poetry: Callimachus Repudiated

The epistolary preface to the first book of the Silvae immediately focuses on the nature of this new kind of poetry, so different from the Thebaid, which Statius is inaugurating.\(^1\) While his great epic-mythological poem did not need any justifications (apart from those which motivated the postponement of a poem to celebrate the achievements of Domitian: Theb. 1.17–33), the case of the Silvae was different, as this genre was clearly less important, and was completely without any tradition to hark back to:

Diu multumque dubitau, Stella iuuenis optime et in studiis nostris eminentissime, qua parte [et] uoluisti, an hos libellos, qui mihi subito calore et quadam festinandi uoluptate fluxerunt, cum singuli de sinu meo pro<dierint>, congregatos ipse dimitterem. quid enim <opus eo tempore hos> quoque auctoritate editionis onerari, quo adhuc pro Thebaide mea, quamuis me reliquerit, timeo? sed et Culicem legimus et Batrachomachiam etiam agnoscimus, nec quisquam est illustrium poetarum qui non aliquid operibus suis stilo remissiore praeluserit. quid quod haec serum erat continere, cum illa uos certe quorum honorii data sunt haberetis?

Silv. 1 Praef. 1–12\(^2\)

\(^1\) The first three books of the work were probably published together in 93 CE (the year after the publication of the Thebaid), and consequently the preface to the first book acted as an introduction to the whole collection: for data and references, cf. Newlands (2009b) 229. Great attention has recently been dedicated to the praeationes, in line with the new critical fortunes of the Silvae: cf. at least Nauta (2002) 280–4 et passim; Newlands (2002) 32–6, (2009a); Johannsen (2006); Pagán (2010).

\(^2\) Citations of Statius are from Shackleton Bailey (2003).
A long time and a great deal I hesitated, Stella, my fine young man, distinguished as you wished to be in my area of literary pursuits, as to whether I should collect these little pieces, which poured out of me in the heat of the moment, and with a kind of pleasurable haste, <springing> from my breast one at time, and send them out myself. For why <should they too> be burdened with the authority of publication <at a time> when I am still afraid for my *Thebaid*, although it has left me? But we read *The Gnat* and even acknowledge *The Battle of Frogs and Mice*, nor has there been any illustrious poet who hasn’t preluded his major works with something in a more relaxed style. Moreover, wasn’t it too late to hold them back, since of course you and the others in whose honor they had been produced already had them?

The discourse addressed to Stella³ immediately raises the problem of the publication of these texts, composed separately, for single social occasions. The difficult decision to publish them was taken by their author, who proclaims his embarrassment and hesitation at allowing declaredly “secondary” texts to circulate with an official hallmark. However, in alluding to the similar doubts about the advisability of publishing a work on the figure of the ideal orator that are expressed by Cicero in the *incipit* of the *Orator* (*Vtrum difficilius aut maius esset negare tibi saepeius idem roganti an efficere id quod rogares diu multumque, Brute, dubitau*), “a long time and a great deal I hesitated, Brutus, as to which course would be more difficult or more important—to deny your oft-repeated request, or to do what you were asking,” Cic. *Orat.* 1), Statius effectively gives dignity to his new work (even if he apparently continues to belittle it), and also to the critical problem of poetics, which he confronts.⁴

Besides Cicero, there is another important intertext that throws light on Statius’ intentions. This is the last of Horace’s *Epistulae*, which acts as the

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³ As the addressee of the second poem of the book, after the initial one whose honorary subject and addressee is Domitian (whose involvement as the addressee of a collection of poems of a minor genre might appear to be an act of outrance), and also as a poet, Stella is the ideal interlocutor for a programmatic-poetological kind of discourse. As regards the principle governing the choice of addressees of *praefationes*, cf. Nauta (2002) 375–6.

⁴ Cf. again Newlands (2009b) 230. The polemical nature of the prefices seems to be implicitly confirmed by Martial’s reference (*2 praeef. 4–5*) to the aggressive prologues of ancient Roman comedy (Newlands [2011b] 57).