Statius Silvae, thirty-two occasional poems, were written probably between 89 and 96 A.D. Here the poet congratulates friends, consoles mourners, offers thanks, admires a monument or artistic object, describes a memorable scene. The verse is light in touch, with a distinct picture quality. Statius gives us in these impromptu poems clear images of Domitians Rome.

Statius was raised in the Greek cultural milieu of the Bay of Naples, and his Greek literary education lends a sophisticated veneer to his ornamental verse. The role of the emperor and the imperial circle in determining taste is another readily apparent influence: the figure of the emperor Domitian permeates these poems. D. R. Shackleton Baileys new edition of the Silvae, a freshly edited Latin text facing a graceful translation, replaces the earlier Loeb Classical Library edition with translation by J. H. Mozley.

My Personal Review:
Statius is a fascinating and enigmatic poet. As an archaeologist, I consult his work for evidence about ancient art and architecture, which he often describes in his Silvae, but the question that inevitably comes to mind when you read his fawning descriptions of Domitian's equestrian statue in the Forum, or his palace on the Palatine, or the fashionable villas of his friends, is "Is this guy FOR REAL?" One thing's for sure, no one could write obsequious flattery like that and really mean it. But did he want everyone to THINK he meant it? Was he doing to Domitian what Steven Colbert did to George W. Bush at the White House Correspondents' Dinner?

Frederick Ahl thinks so, and has written some persuasive articles on that subject. On the other hand, lampooning an emperor with absolute power in a way that could be recognized as lampoon could get you burned at the
stake in the Colosseum the next day, not just uninvited to the next dinner. Was the ridicule subtle enough to slip past the target? Unlikely; Domitian was intelligent as well as being paranoid. He'd find an insult, no matter how subtle. Or was Statius's loyalty to Domitian sincere, but were there subtle warnings and advice between the lines of his poetry? Was he telling Domitian what sort of an emperor he SHOULD be, rather than what Statius thought he already was? That's what Carole Newlands thinks, and discusses persuasively in her book "Statius's Silvae and the Politics of Empire." What complicates the matter further is that however you read them, Statius did know how to use the music and beauty of the Latin language, and use it superbly. Can eloquent poetry be written for crassly political reasons, or can it be used to express barbed satire? I don't know, read it yourself and see what you think.

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