Angelo Poliziano, introductory lecture on Quintilian and the Silvae of Statius (1480)

So far as Statius is concerned, while I grant that these books are not in a state of absolute perfection, nonetheless I have excellent reasons for undertaking to teach them. Nothing prevents us, after all, from assigning to the young at the beginning of their studies not the greatest writers, but those who belong, so to speak, to a lesser, second class, so that they can imitate them more easily

[Poliziano, elegy for Albiera degli Albizzi (1473)]

9 nigra domus tota est (the house is all black)

Statius Silvae 5.1.19: nigra domus questu (the house is black with grief)

89 vertit in hanc torvos Rhamnusia luminis orbes (the Rhamnusian turned her gloomy eyes on her)

Statius Silvae 2.6.74: attendit torvo tristis Rhamnusia vultu (the gloomy Rhamnusian marked him frowning)

. . . In addition, you have always had plenty of teachers who will explicate the best authors for you. But so far as I can see, down to the present you have not had any who were willing to lower themselves to those others. On that account alone you owe your warmest thanks to those who are so eager to serve you that they pay little attention to what others think. But as to Statius, whom we are now discussing, my own views differ considerably from what has been said. True, I will not deny that the vast treasury of Latin includes things that easily surpass these little texts in the weightiness of their subjects, in the scale of their contents, or in the continuity of their style. Still, I think I have the right to claim that the whole body of Latin poetry doesn’t offer you anything clearly superior to these works in heroic grandeur, in range of subject matter, in variety of stylistic devices, in knowledge of places, myths, histories and customs, or in arcane and little-known forms of learning. And this was inevitable: since the individual poems entitled Silvae dealt with distinct subjects, and each of them was confined to a modest number of verses, the poet had to maintain a complete, conscious command of his art, since he saw that he had to match the variety of subjects to be dealt with and thought it was unacceptable to nod in such short works . . . He used so many verbal ornaments, he set out to be so accessible in his statements, clear in his choice of words, delightful in his figures of speech, splendid in his metaphors, and magnificently resondant in his poems, that everything he wrote seems to have been designed for splendor and solemnity. He did consistent justice to this immensely varied set of subjects at every point; in fact, like another Phidias or Apelles, he surpassed it with his extraordinary
stylistic virtuosity. With the *Thebaid* and the *Achilleid* he claimed the second position among epic poets. Here, in the poems of his *Sylvae*, he reached heights that no one else had, and surpassed himself just as Virgil surpassed him in the other categories . . . If someone now asked me, “Why is it, if you think these *Sylvae* are quite perfect, that their own author barely considered them worthy of publication?,” my rejoinder would take the form of a question too: “Why did he publish them if he didn’t think them good?” . . . And the fact that he did not decide to publish them immediately or without thinking it over, but after long and exacting thought, does not justify us in thinking that they were not perfectly polished. But, you will say, he clearly saw something in them that needed further finishing, and therefore, conscious that his case was weak, he tried to protect himself by asking pardon in advance. Even if I grant this, nonetheless I can prove that they are in a state of the highest polish. We have a bad mental habit of measuring not what we have achieved but how much effort we have expended. As a result, because of peevish habits of thought or excessive severity in judgement, which leads to savage criticism, we don’t consider anything truly polished except what has cost us an enormous effort. In fact, though, it is often the case that too much effort makes our writings worse, and that the file does not polish, but crushes, them. This is what the great painter Apelles had in mind when he said that Protogenes had outdone him in one respect: he knew how to take his hand off the picture . . . Too much diligence is often harmful . . . Finally, I am not very impressed by the objection that eloquence had become corrupt in the time of these writers. If we look more closely, we will understand that what had happened was not so much the corruption of eloquence as a transformation in language. For what is different should not simply be dismissed as worse. The later writers are more cultivated, they give us more thrills of pleasure, they offer more adages and ornaments, their observations are never stupid and their word order is never awkward. They are not only healthy, but also strong and joyous and brisk and full of piss and vinegar.

Poliziano, Commentary on the *Silvae* (1480): method

But to deal with you more plainly, and so that you find it easier to grasp all the details, I have chosen the following method: first to explain the meaning, then to clarify the order of the text, then to explain the individual words as carefully as possible, then to go over what pertains to style, and if any play of thought can be found that is worthy of discussion, to pull it from hiding and explain it clearly.

Poliziano on the text of the *Silvae*:

These little texts remained in obscurity until our own times. The learned Poggio brought them from Germany into Italy, full of errors and mutilated and, to tell the truth, missing
half of the full text, but still immensely valuable. The testimony of Sidonius Apollinaris suffices to show us that the surviving collection of Silvae has been cut in half. When he lists the titles of some of the individual Silvae, he also mentions Flavii Farnii Cumaee, a book that has been lost. But the Silvae that we have are set out in five books. Domizio Calderini of Verona, a man of some reputation in our time, was the first to lecture on them and to comment on them in writing. I will follow him so far as I accept his views.

Rebuilding the text: Silvae I praef.: cum singuli de sinu meo pro[        ] . . . [since the individual poems had <       > from my bosom]

Calderini:

Prodiissent. In all the other MSS that I have managed to read, only the beginning of this word was present: the rest had been lost. The scribes found a clear way to show us this by leaving a space where there should have been a whole world. For the text read: De sinu meo pro. congregatos. I wrote what I thought fit the poet’s meaning and the series of letters that could reasonably be drawn from the beginning of the word: De sinu meo prodiissent: that is, which had now departed.

Poliziano:

He seems to have said “profugissent” with regard to his publication of them, and “fluxerunt” with regard to their composition. But we should note that Poggio’s text, the original from which all the other copies are derived, has only the first syllable of this verb, which is pro, and then leaves a blank space. Domizio filled in the verb to make prodiissent, but I do not agree with him. “Prodire” only means to come into view, and seems to be too weak a verb to correspond to the word “congregatos,” which he uses for collecting the books. For we collect in a flock not things that are visible, but things that are scattered. Hence I shall read “profugissent,” as if the metaphor were drawn from birds flying away from his bosom, and then caught and let go again.

Statius Silvae I praef.: Sed et Culicem legimus (But we also read the Culex [Gnat]).

Calderini:

He gives the reason why, though many considerations deterred him from publishing, he brought this work out nonetheless. For as he says, as a rule other poets also use trivial works as preludes for their greater ones. Culicem: This is a work of Virgil, in which he mourns the death of Culex the shepherd. He was young and unpolished when he wrote it.

Poliziano:
Here Domizio, in other respects someone who deserves attention, paid so little attention that he fell right into a disgusting mistake. For he says that in the *Culex*, Virgil mourned the death of Culex the shepherd. In fact, he mourns the death not of a shepherd but of an insect [the gnat that saves a shepherd from a snake at the cost of its own life]

Statius *Silvae* 1.1.1-2

Quae superimposi moles geminata colosso

Stat Latium complexa forum?

(What vast mass, doubled by the immense statue that rests on It, is gathering up the whole Forum?)

Do you not see, Augustine, how he swells up as he applauds the general flattery and fawns upon this most insolent and vain of emperors. Domitian had demanded divine honors: he wanted to be called lord and god. He allowed no statues to be set up for him in the Capitol that were not gold and silver. Four-horse triumphal chariots were seen throughout all parts of the city in his honor, as Suetonius writes. The people dedicated to him an equestrian statue equally remarkable for its workmanship and its size, and placed it in the Forum. The poet strove so hard to win the emperor’s favor that he made himself hated, for when he was given an Alban estate his good fortune irritated Martial, Silius and Juvenal, poets who were his contemporaries. He evokes the eagerness with which the people made the gift and, as it were, raving mad, begins this *Sylva* with his expression of wonder. For since he wanted to please Domition, an emperor whose soul was exalted, he despised all words and introductions that expressed humility. Hence, asking a question that refers to wonder, he asks about the mass that he sees . . .

Poliziano:

For Domitian was so insolent and arrogant, that he claimed both divine honors and the name of lord, which the Romans disliked, and allowed only god and silver statues of a certain weight to be dedicated to him in the Capitoline. And he set up many very large statues of Ianus and arches with four-horse chariots and triumphal insignia in the various regions of the city. Accordingly, if the poet goes in a bit too much for imperial flattery, not only should he not be blamed, but on the contrary he should be praised, for bending with the times and fitting his course to the weather.

The Senate and the people of Rome dedicated to the emperor an equestrian statue equally remarkable for its workmanship and its size, molded of metal, which was supported in the Roman Forum, just beneath the Capitoline hill, on an extremely massive base. The poet praises this so thoroughly that he uses all the resources of his art.
Statius *Silvae* 1.1.37-38:

Dextra vetat pugnas, laevam Tritonia virgo

Non gravat (The right hand forbids battle, the left easily holds the maiden with the Triton.)

Calderini: The right hand forbids battle. Either the right arm of the statue is not armed, or the Temple of Peace is to the right, which I don’t like.

Poliziano:

Quintilian book 11: “There is also a gesture, often found in statues of peacemakers, which consists in inclining the head to the right shoulder, stretching out the arm from the ear and extending the hand with the thumb turned down. This is a special favorite with those who boast that they speak with uplifted hand [11.3.119].” And Statius describes this position just below when he says,

Your right hand forbids battle, your left easily holds

The maiden with the Triton.

Here Domizio said: “the right hand forbids battle, that is, it is not armed in the statue, or the Temple of Peace is to the right. This is wrong, he says. But here he took evasive action, and did not dare to mutter anything.

Statius *Silvae* 1.1.17-18:

nec veris maiora putes: par forma decorque

par honor (And do not think that this surpasses the truth: he is just as beautiful and splendid, just as signified)

Calderini:

Domitian is just as handsome. For the young Domitian was very good-looking, according to Suetonius.

Poliziano:

Since the poet had used every possible trick of style and exhausted all the ways of offering praise, he now takes his chance to move from the equestrian statue to praising the emperor himself. And since all the praise he had already uttered might awake the
thought in the minds of his hearers that the statue must have something greater than Domitian himself, he tries to eradicate this view from their minds by answering it in advance.

An interpretative flourish from Poliziano’s Life of Statius:

But I have a theory about Statius’s wife which is new and, so far as I know, has never been devised by anyone else. The poet Lucan had a beautiful and intelligent wife named Polla Argentaria, who married again after Lucan died. A good deal of evidence leads me to believe that she married Statius . . . But note another really manifest proof. In the prefatory letter to book 2 of the Silvae, we find this: “A birthday poem for Lucan, for which Polla, rarest of wives, took responsibility when we by chance contemplated this day together” (Silvae 2 praeft.) Sniff these words, please, one by one. You will see that they are clearly much too private to fit someone else’s wife. “Rarest of wives,” he says: “wives,” not “women.” “Wives,” because she cultivates the memory of her spouse and sweetly loves the living one. “When we by chance contemplated this day together”: both the particle “by chance” and the plural form of the verb “we contemplated” certainly suggest a rather intimate tone. “Took responsibility”: it was written for her sake, had it given and presented to her. Here too it’s easy to see that the words refer to a wife. And don’t worry about the fact that he calls her Claudia in a letter [Silvae 3 praeft.: in the last poem I urge Claudia to come with me to Naples]. For there could easily be an error in the latter, and in this case considerations of meter can’t be used to correct it: for in the actual Sylva he didn’t mention her name at all. If you take full account of the way in which all of these forms of proof interlock with one another, you’ll accept them not as plausible but as absolutely certain.

The tools of attack

The genre of the Silvae: tradition and the individual critic

Calderini:

A sylva also refers to a great, random heap of things, as in that statement of Cornelius: Probus left a substantial sylva of observations on the ancient language. Finally, a sylva is this form of writing, which moves along quickly, with a sort of mental heat and speed. Quintilian writes as follows about this: : “On the other hand, there is a fault which is precisely the opposite of this, into which those fall who insist on first making a rapid draft of their subject with the utmost speed of which their pen is capable, and write in the heat and impulse of the moment. They call this their rough copy. They then revise what they have written, and arrange their hasty outpourings. But while the words and the rhythm may be corrected, the matter is still marked by the superficiality
resulting from the speed with which it was thrown together [10.3.17]. “Alone of the Latin poets, Statius practiced this with such brilliance that he surpassed the *Thebaid*—a work he edited—in gravity of thoughts, copiousness and elegance of verse in this little work.

But Suetonius in his little book “On famous grammarians” writes that Probus left a substantial sylva on the ancient language, referring to disorganized matter and many things piled up higgledy-piggledy. And that is the origin of the name for this type of writing, on which Quintilian says in book 10 of his *Institutes*: “On the other hand, there is a fault which is precisely the opposite of this, into which those fall who insist on first making a rapid draft of their subject with the utmost speed of which their pen is capable, and write in the heat and impulse of the moment. They call this their rough copy. They then revise what they have written, and arrange their hasty outpourings. But while the words and the rhythm may be corrected, the matter is still marked by the superficiality resulting from the speed with which it was thrown together [10.3.17]. “ And that is the genre to which those little texts of Statius belong: he was so good at this sort of writing that he is thought to have surpassed his other books, which were more polished. I think that in the course of a long work, as in crossing an immense plain, the poet’s efforts at thinking wore out his mind. So when that powerful spirit and motion and, as it were, wind failed him, his language lost its virtue.

The mature Poliziano presents Virgil as a Statian poet in one of his own *Silvae* (*Manto*, 1482, ed. and tr. Charles Fantazzi):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Incipe adhuc gracili connectere carmina filo,} \\
\text{Incipe, magne puer: nec vota intexere Diris} \\
\text{Impia, nec culici gemitum praestare merenti,} \\
\text{Nec te Lampsacium pudeat lusisse Ithyphallum} \\
\text{Blandaque lascivis epigrammata pingere chartis . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

Begin to fashion your poems with a thread still fine; begin, great child; do not be ashamed to weave impious imprecations to the Furies or to have a deserving gnat pour forth just laments, or to write an amusing poem about an Ithyphallus of Lampsacus, or to sketch charming epigrams in lascivious pages.

The style of a poet and a critic: Poliziano, *Miscellanea* (1489), Praefatio:
But I am very far indeed from regretting the fact that my work is described as disorderly and chaotic, as a sort of silva or mess, since I do not write continuously and at length, but by leaps and bounds and peacemeal. And that is why I have chosen the title *Miscellanea*. . . If the *Miscellanea* can be faulted for its variety of content, which purges disgust and stimulates reading, then nature herself can be faulted as well at the same time: for I profess that in my pursuit of differences I am her disciple . . . It is certainly true that if I had kept those commentaries with me and worked on them, and had been able to read them over and savor them after an interval, they would have appeared in a much more finished, elaborate and solid state. For this kind of scholarship grows with every night’s work: as rivers grow right after they fall, so it goes with reading, that bit by bit the work grows richer . . . But lest those with enough time on their hands to do mischief think that I have drawn all of this material from the shitpile, and have not dared to cross the boundary of the grammarians, I have followed Pliny’s example and put the names of the authors before the text—but only the names of solid authors, which support my arguments, and on whom we have drawn—and not those whom others have merely cited, though their works have perished over time, but those whose treasures I myself have handled, through whose texts I have traveled. Moreover, the ancient manuscripts and genuine coins and the ancient inscriptions in metal or on marble, with which you, O Lorenzo, have supplied me, as well as multiple copies of the texts, provide support for my studies.