

In this paper I will argue that Statius *Silu. 1.6* presents a political critique of the Flavian principate by juxtaposing figures of imperial praise with a conception of Saturnalian candor. This poem describes the spectacles presented by Domitian during a Saturnalia celebration. Roman poets frequently appropriated the social inversions of the Saturnalia in order to present various kinds of “unauthorized” speech in their works (e.g. Hor. *Serm. 2.7.1-5*; Mart. 11.2 and 11.6). I argue that Statius employs the theme of Saturnalian freedom, whether real or licensed, to explore how figurative language in praise discourse can constitute political critique. I do not intend to argue that the poem contains a monologic “subversive” message, or that it evinces a kind of political nostalgia, but rather that its Saturnalian rhetoric contrasts the literal and figurative meanings of language within the political context of imperial praise.

I focus first on the phrase *libertas reuerentiam remisit* (45), which Statius uses to describe Domitian’s Saturnalia. Statius is clearly playing with Saturnalian topoi. The surrounding text indicates that social distinctions disappear during the festival (43-44) and that the emperor himself takes part in this temporary social equality (46-50). But since the poem ostensibly praises Domitian and his Saturnalia, we must ask ourselves whether we should read line 45 literally or figuratively. If we read it literally, then the poem does not seem to offer sincere praise of Domitian. Statius’ *reuerentia* for the emperor, banished during the festival, is ironic. If we read the line figuratively, i.e. as stating that freedom does not really do away with reverence, Statius’ *reuerentia* for the emperor is sincere but Saturnalian freedom does not exist. Hence Statius appears to view Saturnalian candor as the literalization of figures of praise.

One such figure in *Silu. 1.6* is an extended metaphor that equates Jupiter and Domitian (9-42), evidently in order to praise Domitian. As with most metaphors, the difference between literal and figurative signification provides its force. Here Jupiter’s storms bring harm, while Domitian’s “storms” (the *spar-siones*) are much more beneficent: *ducat nubila Iuppiter per orbem/ et latis pluuias minetur agris,/ dum nostri Iouis hi ferantur imbres* (25-27). Yet the principal point of contrast in this metaphor, the image of the storm, is ultimately enabled by metonymic similarity (21-24). Although the metaphoric contrast is sustained within this passage by the antithesis *inserena/serena*, the destructive force of Jupiter’s storm (*obruit*, 22) contaminates the description of Domitian’s (*contudit*, 22-24, taken literally). Hence the metonymy *obruit/contudit* provides the basis for the metaphoric contrast between Jupiter and Domitian. On this reading, the literalized metaphor presents both Domitian and Jupiter as destructive forces. Thus while the figurative reading of this metaphor yields praise of the emperor, a more literal reading yields criticism. We have seen, however, that Statius associates unauthorized Saturnalian messages with the literal reading of metaphor. Therefore we may detect here a kind of Saturnalian destabilization of the rhetoric of imperial praise.