

Scott O’Neil

Lorenzo Valla’s “Intellectual Violence”

Personal Feuds and Appropriated Sarcasm

On August 26, 1434, Lorenzo Valla received a letter from his fellow educator and friend, Maffeo Vegio.¹ In this letter, Vegio expressed shock and claimed to have fallen speechless when he heard about Valla’s current project—a new dialectic that would “radically depart” from the one established by Aristotle and “the ancients.” Taking great pains to reassure Valla of his continued esteem, Vegio simultaneously urged caution, imploring Valla to remember “*quas olim inimicitias, que odia tibi excitasti*”² [“the enemies you have made in the past, the grudges you have incited.”]³ Ultimately, Vegio tells his friend to exercise more caution and “*compesce hoc nimium acumen tuum, tuam hanc, ut ita dixerim, ingenii violentiam*” [“keep in check that excessive sharpness of yours, and what I may call your intellectual violence.”]⁴ The fact that Valla received such a warning from a friend should come as no surprise. As Vegio noted, Valla had offended before he decided to challenge Aristotle’s work, and he wasn’t exactly apologetic about his attempts to replace Aristotle’s dialectic with his own. In fact, he routinely suggested that his challenge to Aristotle was more of an “homage to the fiercely independent philosopher who rejected the teachings of his master, Plato.”⁵

Perhaps Valla’s best-known offense was his bitingly sarcastic attack on the dubious Donation of Constantine. While Valla’s philological exposure of the fraudulent nature of the Donation ruffled more than a few papal feathers, it was the 16th century/Reformation use of the text—particularly by Martin Luther—that made it notorious. It is my contention, building primarily on the work of

1 Lorenzo Valla, *Lorenzo Valla: Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Brendan Cook (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013).

2 At the suggestion of a reviewer, I have included both Valla’s original Latin and the English translation, where possible. These translations are not my own, but those of Brenden Cook and G.W. Bowersock in their I Tatti editions of Valla’s *Correspondence* and *On the Donation of Constantine* respectively. One Valla passage, taken from the Proemium to his *Elegantiae*, was sourced from an edition that included only the English translation, so in that one instance, the Latin text is not included. In section 6, I utilize several passages from Martin Luther, translated by Preserved Smith and Tryntje Helfferich. These monographs did not include the original German language text—nor, quite honestly, would I have been able to make sense of it if they had included the German text—so only the English translation is included in this chapter.

3 Valla, *Correspondence*, 35.

4 Valla, *Correspondence*, 35–37.

5 Valla, *Correspondence*, xviii.

David M. Whitford, that Luther took the most vitriolic elements from Valla as an assault on the *office* of the pope, when the most vitriolic sarcasm was actually aimed at non-papal sources. Valla's text contains several layers of sarcasm, with some being overt—such as his rhetorical attacks on the unknown forger—and others being more covert or subtextual—with these being aimed specifically at one pope, Eugenius IV. Valla's overt sarcasm made the text quite appealing to Reformation leaders in general and Luther in particular.

Valla's biting sarcasm—so appealing in England and Germany when it arrived—was not particularly unusual for mid-15th and early 16th century Italy. In many ways, Valla was merely a forerunner to the style of academia that would become prominent just one generation later. For the generation of teachers and scholars after Lorenzo Valla, showmanship, performativity, and violent sarcasm were all part of the cult of academic personality that was necessary to succeed in the field. The fierce competition for academic prestige led scholars to seek out novel texts on which to specialize and claim “mastery” over smaller academic fiefdoms. As Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine noted, even “the very choice of such [obscure] works as subject matter was an act of audacity, and might be enough to make a reputation.”⁶ The key difference between this competitive sarcasm and that of Valla is that the generation following Valla was focused so much on showmanship that many of them ended up “fabricating evidence to give their lectures more spice.”⁷

It wasn't just the scholars in quattrocento Italy who turned to more performative methods of demonstrating individuality. Men in the Italian Renaissance began wearing their unique personalities—quite literally—on their faces. Douglas Biow, noting the sharp change in Italian portraiture in the late 15th century, delightfully puzzles over the question of why Italian men went from clean-shaven to wearing an absurd variety of—and a variety of absurd—beards.⁸ Biow initially raises and dismisses—to various degrees—several theories, ranging from the role of “other” shifting from the bearded Jew and Turk to the beardless natives of the “New World,” city versus country anxiety, and a rush to adopt the fashions of imposing cultures. Biow, noting that it would be “supremely difficult to validate...a direct cause-and-effect historical explanation for the appearance...of a fashion,”⁹ ultimately suggests that the rise in rather unusual facial hair is likely

6 Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), 83.

7 Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism*, 86.

8 Douglas Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 181–206.

9 Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 189.

attributable to two contributing factors—the invasion of Italy by the French and Italy's pronounced move towards a "courtly society" where men were "made to feel subordinate."¹⁰ Biow suggests that beards became a method to signal both conformity and individuality.¹¹ Through their beards, Italian men could be unique and wear a mask of sorts to craft identity almost like a piece of clothing.¹²

This short detour on facial hair, combined with Grafton and Jardine's work on sarcastically performative scholars, serves to frame a key question: If Italian men just one generation after Valla were, in many ways, just like him, why did his piece on the Donation of Constantine become so important to the Reformation? After all, Valla was renowned for his "intellectual violence," and his sarcastic remarks towards the pope may have seemed a bit tame in comparison to those scholars who succeeded him. In order to answer these questions, a careful analysis of the structure of Valla's sarcasm—both overt and covert—must be done, though a brief overview of the content and the context of Valla's text seems prudent.

Lorenzo Valla's oration *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione*—also called *On the Fraudulent and Falsely Trusted Donation of Constantine*—also called *On the Donation of Constantine*—also called (both by Valla himself and to simplify things moving forward) the *Oratio*—is often recognized as the text that founded philology by using historical and linguistic approaches to decisively prove the Donation of Constantine as a forgery and—to hear Valla tell it—not a particularly convincing one. The forgery, likely Carolingian in origin,¹³ was supposedly written by Emperor Constantine. In the dubious text, Constantine, newly Christian and in debt to Pope Sylvester for curing him of leprosy, gifts half of his empire, including Rome, to Sylvester and the church. This conflation of spiritual and worldly power in the pontiff ends up being problematic, not necessarily because of how or if the Donation was utilized but because of the ensuing debates on the corrupting influence of temporal power on the supreme pontiff. Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) was the first to actually claim secular power through the Donation, and by the fourteenth century, while the Donation was a source of debate amongst papalists and imperialists, most pontiffs paid little attention to it.¹⁴ Even Innocent IV viewed the Donation as "a confirmation of the

¹⁰ Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 189.

¹¹ Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 195.

¹² Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 205.

¹³ G. R. Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation: Tradition, Emergence and Rupture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 110.

¹⁴ Thomas Renna, "Lorenzo Valla and the Donation of Constantine in Historical Context, 1439–40," *Expositions* 8.1 (2014): 1–28.

temporal authority the supreme priest already possesses from Peter and Christ.”¹⁵

Whether derived from Christ, Peter, Constantine, or an unnamed forger, the conflation of secular and spiritual power led to social and political upheaval in Rome. When the papacy moved to Avignon France, Rome was left in pieces as various factions competed for control of a now leaderless city. Making the authority gap even more confusing was the fact that there was a pope and an anti-pope from 1378 to 1429, and there were three different popes claiming authority in 1409.¹⁶ Pope Martin V (1417–1431) finally consolidated the papacy and began to restore Rome, but his successor, Eugenius IV, had to flee Rome and set up his pontificate in Florence. Eugenius’ conflicts with other candidates for European leadership—the Council of Basel, Frederick III, and Charles VII of France—grew routinely more contentious, and seemed beyond repair when the Council of Basel suspended and ultimately deposed Eugenius from office, electing Felix V (1438–1449) as an antipope.¹⁷ Eugenius, through a combination of concessions, treaties, and Felix’ inability to gain any support, was able to return to Rome in 1443, weakened but victorious.

This is the context for Valla’s *Oratio*. Valla was then secretary to Alfonso, King of Aragon, who was one of the chief opponents of Eugenius IV. Alfonso was in a long-standing conflict to gain control of Naples from allies of Eugenius, and Valla’s biting sarcastic text was deployed at Eugenius’ weakest point—mere months after the Council of Basel deposed him. Valla mentions Eugenius, both directly and, it would seem, indirectly, at several points in his *Oratio*, and it is this sarcastic assault on a sitting yet temporarily deposed pope that has largely been the source of Valla’s legacy and the primary site of critical inquiry.

Much of the critical work done on Lorenzo Valla’s *Oratio* focuses either on Valla’s intent or motivations for writing such an attack or on the impact of the text during the English Reformation, nearly 100 years after its initial composition. Some, like G.W. Bowersock, see the *Oratio* as more of an “extension of his literary and philosophical interests than as a political weapon offered to Alfonso in the struggle with Eugenius.”¹⁸ Others, like Thomas Renna have taken issue with the *Oratio* itself, referring to it as “a rambling collage of disparate arguments only loosely connected” and suggesting that the reason for the odd structure of the text is that Valla was attempting to address several audiences

¹⁵ Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation of Constantine,” 11.

¹⁶ J. H. Plumb, *The Italian Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 79–80.

¹⁷ Plumb, *Italian Renaissance*, 3.

¹⁸ Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), vii.

—most particularly the German emperor.¹⁹ Riccardo Fubini argues that Valla's text, "through the unheard-of accusation of falsehood, had turned the denunciation of the 'authenticity' of the *Constitutum* into a truly revolutionary instrument," one which, to the coming Reformation, was "recognized" as sharing their "frontal attack on papal tradition and canonical norms."²⁰ Whitford has gone one step further, demonstrating the crucial role of Valla's text in Martin Luther's classification of the Pope as the Anti-Christ.²¹

Whitford's work meticulously traces the connections between Valla and Luther, showing how Luther's 1520 encounter with Valla's text transformed Luther's concern that the pope "might be" the antichrist into a concrete certainty of that fact. What Whitford's work does not fully explain is why Luther became so enchanted with Valla's text. After all, as mentioned earlier, Valla was hardly the only writer to deploy his kind of sarcastic invective. Further, he wasn't even the first one to address the issue of conflated secular and religious authority. G.R. Evans offers an excellent overview²² of the centuries-long debate over the "two swords" in which she points out that the nobility of Europe essentially only had two professional options—military service or religious service.²³ As such, the struggle between church and secular authority was frequently an inter- and intra-familial struggle. Well before Valla, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the two swords by suggesting that one was to be wielded by the church and the other for the church.²⁴ While the *plenitudo potestatis*—the pope's claim to temporal authority—had been claimed as early as the 5th century by Leo I, it wasn't until the Middle Ages, particularly under Innocent III, that the claim was strongly pressed.²⁵ Not only was the issue of the two swords debated publicly more than a century before Valla's text, but the specific issue of the validity—or rather the lack thereof—of the Donation of Constantine had also been raised before Valla's text. Nicholas of Cusa, in his *De concordantia catholica*, cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Donation, and it was likely a topic of conversation during "the protracted debates about papal authority in the Councils of

19 Renna, "Lorenzo Valla and the Donation," 2.

20 Riccardo Fubini, "Humanism and Truth: Valla Writes against the Donation of Constantine," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.1 (1996): 79–86.

21 David M. Whitford, "Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla," *Renaissance Quarterly* 61.1 (2008): 26–52.

22 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 110–124.

23 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 111.

24 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 115.

25 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 116.

Ferrara and Florence in 1438 and 1439.”²⁶ So what was it about Valla’s text—a text that entered an old debate and covered no truly new ground—that so resonated with Luther and the Reformation? Valla’s use of a kind of layered sarcasm might be the most effective way to approach such a question.

The structure of Valla’s *Oratio* is important here because, as Renna notes, the various parts seem addressed to different audiences and, as will become clear, deploy different kinds of sarcasm. The *Oratio* opens with a brief introduction fairly devoid of sarcasm, wherein he feigns reluctance to speak but claims to have an obligation to do so, in the name of truth. This quickly leads into the first part of the *Oratio*, in which Valla deploys several personae, each giving testimony to an imagined jury of princes and kings. First, he speaks as the sons of Constantine, questioning their father’s decision to give away their inheritance. Then he speaks as an orator for the Senate and the Roman people, telling Constantine that he has no right to give away Rome. Finally, he speaks as Sylvester himself, pleading with Constantine not to make a gift of an empire to a man who, as a good Christian pontiff, would be spiritually incapable of receiving such a gift.

The second section leaves the personae behind, but sees a sharp increase in sarcasm, as the speaker, presumably Valla, addresses an unnamed “you.” He is still railing against the illogical notion of the Donation and the utter lack of historical evidence that any such donation took place. This section also features the first direct reference to Eugenius IV, who, Valla notes, is “*qui vivis cum Felicis tamen venia*” [“still alive but only by the grace of Felix.”]²⁷ The third section is incredibly short,²⁸ and involves Valla pointing out that Constantine was a demonstrated Christian before Sylvester’s papacy, based on historical records from Pope Melchiades, Sylvester’s predecessor.

The fourth section is the one most recognized for its deployment of philological analysis. In this section, Valla questions everything from geography to word choice in his destruction of the Donation, and he often directly addresses the forger, upon whom he offers his harshest sarcasm. The fifth section features Valla posing a hypothetical, that even if everything in the Donation were taken as fact, at some point, the empire was lost, and according to Biblical and Roman law, there was no right to reclaim a subject who had been free for so long.

²⁶ Valla, *On the Donation*, vi.

²⁷ Valla, *On the Donation*, 53.

²⁸ The third section of the *Oratio*, in Bowersock’s 2007 translation for the I Tatti Renaissance Library edition, is barely one page in length. In contrast, in the same edition, the first section is 17 pages, the second section is nearly 6 pages, the fourth section is 39 pages, and the fifth and sixth sections are each about 8 pages in length.

The sixth and final section features a refrain of sorts, *The Roman Church has exercised its authority*,²⁹ to which Valla offers several rebuttals. The *Oratio* ends with Valla blasting several popes, the papacy itself, and Eugenius in particular, but it ends with Valla's statement that he wants his first speech to be one of counsel, not a call to action. He states, "*nolo exhortari principes ac populos, ut papam effrenato cursu volitantem inhibeat eumque intra suos fines consistere compellant, sed tantum admoneant, qui forsitan iam edoctus veritatem sua sponte ab aliena domo in suam et ab insanis fluctibus sevisque tempestatibus in portum se recipiet*" ["I do not wish to encourage rulers and peoples to restrain the Pope as he surges ahead in his unbridled course and to force him to stay within his own borders, but only to counsel him, when perhaps he has already recognized the truth, to move back voluntarily from a house that is not his own into one where he belongs and into a haven from irrational tides and cruel storms."] ³⁰ Valla comes off as something of an optimist here, as he hopes to see a change, as a result of his oration, where the Pope will become the "*tantum vicarius Christi sit et non etiam Cesaris*" ["vicar of Christ alone and not of the emperor as well."] ³¹ This optimistic conclusion—and Luther's likely reaction to it—will be useful in approaching the two distinct brands of sarcasm deployed by Valla. That, combined with the afterlives³² of Valla's text, can shed light on why Valla's *Oratio*, as opposed to the others on this very topic, resonated with Luther.

The overt sarcasm and satire Valla constructs in his *Oratio* matches the five points of Ashley Marshall's definition of satire.³³ It is a "literary" art that "attacks" its "real" targets in an often "humorous" manner in a seemingly "negative" enterprise.³⁴ As George A. Test noted, "That satire is an attack is probably the least debatable claim that one can make about it."³⁵ Valla's overt sarcasm, particularly that unleashed on the presumed forger of the Donation of Constantine, is nothing if not an attack. In Valla's first reference to the forger, he notes that he wants "*optorto collo in iudicium trahere volo*" ["to grab [him] by the neck and drag [him] into court."] ³⁶ In short order, Valla takes his attack directly to the

²⁹ As translated by Bowersock. This phrase and the original Latin will be addressed later in this chapter.

³⁰ Valla, *On the Donation*, 159.

³¹ Valla, *On the Donation*, 159.

³² The plural is intentional here—Valla's text can be shown to have at least three distinct afterlives—immediate, 16th century, and contemporary.

³³ Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England 1658–1770* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

³⁴ Marshall, *Practice of Satire*, 2.

³⁵ Marshall, *Practice of Satire*, 2.

³⁶ Valla, *On the Donation*, 61.

long-dead forger, practically frothing as he rails that the “*Paginam privilegii appellat homo vesanus. Privilegiumne tu—libet velut presentem insectari—vocas donationem orbis terrarum? et hoc in pagina vis esse scriptum et isto genere orationis usum esse Constantinum?*” [“madman calls it the *text of the grant*. Do you—I prefer to attack him as if he were present before me—do you speak of a donation of the world as a grant? Do you claim...that Constantine used that kind of language?”]³⁷ Valla’s attack on the forger continues until he is literally without words, and he routinely opens his attacks with lines such as “*O scelerate atque malefice...O caudex, o stipes!*” [“you scoundrel, you miscreant...you blockhead, you dolt!”]³⁸ and he eventually appeals to Lactantius—historically the advisor to Constantine and tutor to his son—to “*Revivisce paulisper, Firmiane Lactanti, resisteque huic asino tam vaste immaniterque rudenti*” [“Come back to life, Lactantius, just for a moment, and shut up the gross and monstrous braying of this ass.”]³⁹

Valla is only slightly more generous towards those supporters of the forger, often addressed with an ambiguously utilized “you,” whom he calls “*non tam homines quam pecudes*” [“more cattle than people.”]⁴⁰ For example, at the beginning of the second section, when Valla questions the validity of the Donation based on the lack of evidence that Sylvester accepted any such offer, he notes “*At credibile est, dicitis, ‘ratam hunc habuisse donationem.’ Ita credo, nec ratam habuisse modo verum etiam petiisse, rogasse, precibus extorisse credibile est*” [“‘But,’ you say, ‘it is believable that he approved this donation.’ It is as believable, in my opinion, as that he not only approved it but even sought it, asked for it, and extorted it by his prayers.”]⁴¹ Later, when Valla questions the fact that there are no records or accounts of Sylvester’s control of the empire, asking the forger’s supporters “*que bella gessit? quas nationes ad arma spectantes oppresit?...‘Nihil horum scimus,’ respondetis. Ita puto nocturno tempore hec omnia gesta sunt et ideo nemo vidit*” [“What wars did he wage? What nations on the verge of armed revolt did he suppress?...‘We do not know anything about this,’ you answer. So I imagine that everything was accomplished in the dead of night, and that is why no one saw anything.”]⁴² In these passages—the ones di-

37 Valla, *On the Donation*, 65.

38 Valla, *On the Donation*, 67.

39 Valla, *On the Donation*, 71.

40 Valla, *On the Donation*, 51.

41 Valla, *On the Donation*, 43–45.

42 Valla, *On the Donation*, 47.

rected at the unknown forger and the ambiguous "you"⁴³—the sarcastic tone is unmistakable. Valla's sarcasm drips venom in these passages, and it is nearly impossible *not* to read them in a sarcastic manner. These, in short, represent the kind of "intellectual violence" that Maffeo Vegio warned his friend about. What remains interesting here, however, is who is not addressed with this kind of dripping invective—and that is Eugenius IV.

In Whitford's astute analysis of Valla's influence on Martin Luther's identification of the Pope as the Anti-Christ, he mentions one passage from the *Oratio* in particular, and that passage was part of Valla's Pope Sylvester persona. In this persona, Valla has Sylvester deliver a speech to Constantine, expounding on the many reasons why the gift of an empire would be illogical. That Sylvester speech, however, includes several moments of overt sarcasm, exaggerated to highlight the ridiculousness of the Donation. In one moment, Valla's Sylvester persona demonstrates that it is clearly aware of the arguments of the previous personae—the sons of Constantine and the orator of Rome—and even re-asserts those ideas that had been previously set forth by those earlier personae:

si foret tui iuris partem imperii cum regina orbis, Roma, alteri tradere quam filiis—quod minime sentio—, si populus hic, si Italia, si ceterae nationes sustinerent, ut, quos oderunt et quorum religionem adhuc respuunt, capti illecebris seculi eorum imperio obnoxii esse vellent—quod impossibile est—, tamen, si quid mihi credendum putas, fili amantissime, ut tibi assentire ulla adduci ratione non possem, nisi vellem mihi ipsi esse dissimilis et condicionem meam oblivisci ac propemodum dominum Iesum abnegare

[Suppose you had the right to hand over to someone other than your sons a part of your empire containing Rome, the reigning capital of the world—something I do not at all believe—; suppose this people, suppose Italy, suppose all the other nations, seduced as they are by worldly attractions, would agree, against all plausibility, that they preferred to be subject to those whom they hate and whose religion they have hitherto spat upon. Even so, my most loving son—if you think you owe me some credence—I could still not be induced by any argument to agree with you unless I wished to be untrue to myself, forget my station, and almost deny my Lord Jesus.]⁴⁴

43 Valla's use of the second person pronoun is intriguing if not a bit confusing. At times, he addresses the unknown forger as "you." At other times, he uses the pronoun to refer to those who support the forger. The "you" appears at the beginning of the second section, which is preceded by Valla speaking in the persona of Sylvester. He is clearly *not* speaking as Sylvester here. He—as himself—had last addressed the audience of Kings and Princes—though it is clear that "you" does *not* refer to that high audience—an audience that, as will be shown later—included Eugenius IV.

44 Valla, *On the Donation*, 31–33.

That Luther's thinking was so galvanized by a passage in a text that was dripping with sarcasm illustrates that the appeal of Valla's text was either accidentally or willfully misunderstood as an attack on an institution rather than an attack—or, even more aptly, an appeal—to an individual pope, Eugenius IV.

The covert/subtextual sarcasm can help to illuminate this appeal to Eugenius. From the earliest pages of his *Oratio*, Valla hints that he knows whose hands his text will fall into. When he first establishes his imagined audience of kings and princes, he states that he permits himself to plead as if in their company, “*ut certe facio, nam mea hec oratio in manus eorum ventura est*” [“into whose hands I am confident my speech will come.”]⁴⁵ Not only does this suggest that Valla believes that Eugenius will encounter his text, but it also—with a nuanced layer of sarcasm—gently jabs the pontiff for thinking of himself as a king or a prince—thus setting the rhetorical stage for Valla's entrance into the ongoing debate about the two swords—secular and spiritual. Valla continues to weave a sort of subtextual trap throughout the *Oratio*. In addressing his royal audience, he asks if any of them, in Constantine's place, would give their empire as a gift and remove themselves to a modest town: “*Quid enim vobis expectatus, quid iocundius, quid gratius contingere solet, quam accessio-nem imperiis vestris vos regnisque adiungere et longe lateque quam maxime pro-ferre dicionem? In hoc, ut videre videor, omnis vestra cura, omnis cogitatio, omnis labor dies noctesque consumitur...quin ipse hic ardor atque hec late dominandi cupiditas, ut quisque maxime potens est, ita eum maxime angit atque agitat*” [“What is normally more desirable, more pleasurable, more welcome than for you to enlarge your empires and kingdoms and to extend your sway as far and wide as possible? It seems to me that all your concern, all your thinking, all your effort is taken up day and night with this...this blazing passion for extensive rule most of all goads and drives one who is already supremely powerful.”]⁴⁶

Through this subtly sarcastic question, Valla weaves a trap around Eugenius. If Eugenius is the head of an empire, as he claims to be via the Donation of Constantine, he has only two possible answers to this question—either he wouldn't give up his kingdom, and he must admit the unlikeliness of the Donation, or he would give up his kingdom, and he should do just that in the name of the faith. It also serves to chastise Eugenius for being overly focused on extending his authority and enlarging a secular “kingdom.”

If this suggestion seems a bit of a stretch, one need only look further along in the *Oratio*. Near his conclusion, Valla reveals his rhetorical cards and tells Euge-

45 Valla, *On the Donation*, 11.

46 Valla, *On the Donation*, 11–13.

nus directly that he has demonstrated, via philology and logic, that the pope had possession of the empire through "*per ignorantiam atque stultitiam*" ["ignorance and stupidity"] and asks: "*possedissee docui, ius istud, si quod erat, amittes? et quod inscitia male contulerat tibi, nonne id rursus cognitio bene adimet mancipiumque ab iniusto ad iustum dominum revertetur, fortassis etiam cum usufructu? Quod si adhuc possidere pergis, iam inscitia in malitiam fraudemque conversa est planeque effectus es male fidei possessor*" ["will you not forfeit that right, if you ever had it? Will not knowledge provide a salutary removal of what your ignorance unfortunately brought to you, and will not your estate go back from an unjust master to the just, perhaps even with interest? But if you persist in keeping possession, your ignorance is straightaway transformed into malice and deceit, and you plainly become a possessor in bad faith"].⁴⁷

While the "you" here is not explicitly connected with Eugenius IV, he would seem to be the only possible target. Not only does Valla proceed to rail against Eugenius by name in the passages immediately following this, but Eugenius is the only living pope able to "forfeit that right"—a right not claimed by Felix. This is also not the only part of the *Oratio* where Valla questions the intellect of the papacy in general and Eugenius in particular. Near the conclusion, Valla notes that he should not be surprised by the fact that pontiffs did not understand the philological flaws he found in the Donation, as they do not possess his skill with language. He says this in a far more sarcastic manner, of course, listing several instances where pontiffs have incorporated terms based on mistranslation specifically of Greek.⁴⁸ Here too is another instance of Valla likely subtextually attacking Eugenius directly. Valla was passionate about language and competitive about his skill therein. In his Proemium to his *Elegantiae*, titled "The Glory of the Latin Language," Valla situated himself as a sort of linguistic savior of Rome: "Therefore, because of my devotion to my native Rome and because of the importance of the matter, I shall arouse and call forth all men who are lovers of eloquence, as if from a watch tower, and give them, as they say, the signal for battle."⁴⁹

Valla valued language—Latin in particular, but Greek, as well—so highly that he saw it as above temporal power. He viewed himself as a rare master of language, one who might recover true Latinity from the "barbarian" version that was common at the time. Partly because of that mastery, he saw in himself an

47 Valla, *On the Donation*, 148–149.

48 Valla, *On the Donation*, 131–133.

49 Lorenzo Valla, "The Glory of the Latin Language," in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Viking Press, 1953), 131–135.

authority and a responsibility to speak out—often harshly—against those who had more temporal power. As he said himself at the outset of his *Oratio*—“*Neque enim is verus est habendus orator, qui bene scit dicere, nisi et dicere audeat*” [“No one who knows how to speak well can be considered a true orator unless he also dares to speak out.”]⁵⁰ But how does this connect to Eugenius? In November of 1443, as he was trying to secure permission from an irate Eugenius to return to Rome, Valla sent a letter to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan. In this letter, Valla attempted to appeal to the shared history he and Eugenius had experienced, and he wrote, “*Ego Eugenium ante papatum dilexi atque amavi adhuc adolescentulus, cum eidem preceptorum Greearum litterarum uterque operam daret*” [“I loved and cherished Eugenius before he was pope, from my youth when we both studied with the same Greek master” (emphasis mine).]⁵¹ Both Valla and Eugenius—then known by his pre-pontiff name of Gabriele Condulmer—studied Greek with Rinuccio da Castiglion Fiorentino.⁵² As such, Valla’s sarcastic critiques of the papacy—critiques not only grounded in a lack of skill with language in general but with Greek in particular—can easily be read as a far more personal attack on Eugenius the person—an almost schoolboy competitiveness—more than Eugenius as a representation of the papacy. While Valla is clearly attacking Eugenius, that does not necessarily mean that he is setting him up as an “arch-villain” as Renna suggests.⁵³

Valla certainly had superficial reasons to attack Eugenius on several personal grounds beyond schoolboy competitiveness. He had unsuccessfully sought an appointment with Eugenius on two occasions (in 1431 and 1434) without success.⁵⁴ Further, Eugenius and Valla’s employer were long-time foes. Valla’s deep passion for his Rome also could have been an impetus for attacking the Pope who terrorized its citizens before being driven from the city. None of these seem like justifications for a vitriolic attack, however. The lost job opportunity was nearly a decade past, and Eugenius, at the time of the *Oratio*, seemed to be on the verge of defeat anyway, having just been deposed as a heretic by the Council of Basel.⁵⁵ What seems particularly odd, however, is the fact that the covert/subtextual sarcasm deployed against Eugenius doesn’t quite fit the standard criteria mentioned earlier for satire, despite the harsh use of sarcasm.

50 Valla, *On the Donation*, 5.

51 Valla, *Correspondence*, 143.

52 Valla, *Correspondence*, 384. Note 3, Brendan Cook.

53 Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation,” 8.

54 Valla, *On the Donation*, vi-vii.

55 Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation,” 3–5.

While the subtextual sarcasm/satire in the *Oratio* is still literary and addresses a real target in a humorous way, it never quite reaches the level of a full-blown attack, to say nothing of being a wholly negative enterprise.⁵⁶ On the contrary, Valla offers several occasions where Eugenius, or any previous pope, could excuse himself of guilt—the excuse wasn't particularly positive, but it did offer a chance at absolution as Valla saw it. In the fourth section of his *Oratio*, Valla begins to establish this opportunity by asking those who "*quicumque hunc vera dixisse existimant atque defendunt*" ["think this person [that is, the forger] spoke the truth and defend him"], if their predecessors, those whom they cite as authorities on the Donation, would have persevered in their views if "*si eadem audissent que tu*" ["they had heard what you have heard."] ⁵⁷ He also notes that his audience, the amorphous "you" of the oration, is urging him forward in his attack on supreme pontiffs, a group "*quos magis in delictis suis operire vellem*" ["over whose mistakes I would rather draw a veil."] ⁵⁸ He concludes the fourth section by giving an even stronger excuse to past and sitting pontiffs—that they would not have been expected to see what he has seen because—as has been mentioned—popes haven't had his skill with language. He ends the section by stating "*Hec dicta sint, ut nemo miretur, si donationem Constantini commenticiam fuisse pape multi non potuerunt deprehendere, tam et si ab aliquo eorum ortam esse hanc fallaciam reor*" ["let these points be made so that no one may wonder why many popes were unable to grasp that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery, even though in my opinion this deception originated with one of them."] ⁵⁹ Rather than attack Eugenius mercilessly as he did the forger, Valla continuously opens the door to a justified excuse—and it seems reasonable to suggest that the excuse had more to do with the general exercise of secular authority than with anything specifically to do with the Donation of Constantine. The Donation was likely just a pretense, as again, Valla was not the first to suggest that it was a forgery. While none of the potential "escape clauses" that Valla seeded within his text would be particularly complimentary, he *did* include them, which suggests that the purpose of the *Oratio* was less intended as invective and more intended as corrective. As we have seen from his previous texts, from the letters of his contemporaries, and in the more overtly sarcastic portions of the *Oratio*, when Valla wished to be "intellectually violent," he did so unambiguously.

⁵⁶ Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, 2.

⁵⁷ Valla, *On the Donation*, 117.

⁵⁸ Valla, *On the Donation*, 119.

⁵⁹ Valla, *On the Donation*, 131–133.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that such a layered text would have several vastly different textual afterlives. The modern reception has far more to do with the origins of philology than with anything ecumenical. While there were some positive responses to the text,⁶⁰ the initial reception of Valla's *Oratio* can best be summed up as one of acrimony on the part of those close to Eugenius IV, and a reaction of "meh" on the part of everyone else. This did prove temporarily problematic to Valla, particularly when his patron, Alfonso, changed his allegiances and reconciled with Eugenius, after the latter had parted ways with Alonso's enemy, Rene of Anjou.⁶¹ This shift in allegiance put Valla into an awkward position. Just three years removed from mocking the man, Valla saw Eugenius reconcile with his patron and make a triumphant return to Rome. It seems clear that Eugenius was harboring a grudge over the *Oratio*, but what is perhaps most telling is that the grudge seems to be more personal than institutional.

Valla tried on several occasions to regain access to his beloved Rome. He wrote twice to Cardinals seeking safe passage, first to Cardinal Trevisan—the same Cardinal who negotiated the reconciliation between Eugenius and Alonso—in November of 1443, in a letter that praised Eugenius and stated that his *Oratio* was never written out of malice, and that he would have preferred to write it under the reign of any other pope.⁶² When the letter to Trevisan, with its apology for the *Oratio* failed, Valla tried again in January of 1444, writing to Cardinal Gerardo Landriani, and appealing for safe passage to Rome to visit his mother out of filial duty.⁶³ Interestingly, Valla also sent a letter to his friend, Giovanni Aurispa, about a month after his letter to Trevisan and a few weeks before his letter to Landriani, wherein he wrote, "*Orationem meam De donatione Constantini, qua nihil magis oratorium scripsi, sane longam, rescribe an videris, habiturus a me eam, nisi vidisti*" ["write back and let me know if you have seen my speech *On the Donation of Constantine*; despite its length, it is the purest piece of oratory I have written. If you have not seen it, you will receive it from me."] ⁶⁴ Clearly, Valla wasn't quite so abashed as he seemed in his letter to Trevisan.

⁶⁰ Shortly after publication, notable humanist Gregorio Tifernate read it and stated that it "had been written in support of the church of Christ, not against the church." See Valla, *On the Donation*, viii.

⁶¹ Renna, "Lorenzo Valla and the Donation," 5.

⁶² Valla, *Correspondence*, 143–145.

⁶³ Valla, *Correspondence*, 163.

⁶⁴ Valla, *Correspondence*, 157.

Eugenius' allies did manage to bring Valla before the Inquisition at Naples in 1444 based—officially—on his criticism of Aristotle and Boethius, but as soon as Eugenius died in 1448, the papacy held no grudge toward Valla. Nicholas V, Eugenius' successor, hired Valla as an apostolic *scriptor* in Rome. In 1455, Calixtus III made Valla papal secretary. As Bowersock has mentioned, "apart from personal enmity in the court of Eugenius, there was no sign that the papacy was smarting from his demolition of the Donation."⁶⁵

The eighty years that passed between Valla's composition of the *Oratio* and the Reformation's use of it blurred many of these lines, however. By the mid-sixteenth century, Valla's *Oratio* was seen as a fierce attack on the papacy as an institution, and it was added to the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559.⁶⁶ Cardinal (now Saint) Robert Bellarmine was fond of referring to Valla as *praecursor Lutheri*, in a none-too-flattering context. This shift in Valla's reputation had more to do with who was then *reading* Valla than anything that Valla had written. Preserved Smith claims that "the writings of Valla...had their place in the Reformer's library."⁶⁷ While Valla was popular with humanist thinkers—Erasmus and Vives both enjoyed his work, particularly on dialectic—it was only Luther who, as Whitford demonstrates, seemed to be changed by Valla's words, and changed in such a way that fueled Luther's own "intellectual violence" towards Rome. It was Luther's reading—or perhaps misreading—of Valla's text that contributed to the tone of his open letter to Pope Leo X.

As noted earlier, Whitford argues that Valla, specifically the Sylvester speech, was the turning point that took Luther from suspicion about the pope as antichrist to fiery belief in that construction.⁶⁸ Luther seemingly extrapolated upon that bit of personae-driven, overt sarcasm to see in the papacy what he had already begun to suspect. Shortly after encountering Valla's text in February of 1520, Luther wrote to George Spalatin to relay his discovery of both the text and his use of it in labeling Rome as a seat of wickedness:

I have at hand Lorenzo Valla's proof...that the Donation of Constantine is a forgery. Good heavens! What darkness and wickedness is at Rome! You wonder at the judgment of God that such unauthentic, crass, impudent lies not only lived but prevailed for so many centuries, that they were incorporated in the Canon Law, and (that no degree of horror might be wanting) that they became as articles of faith. I am in such a passion that I scarcely doubt that the Pope is the Antichrist expected by the world, so closely do their acts, lives,

⁶⁵ Valla, *On the Donation*, ix.

⁶⁶ Valla, *On the Donation*, viii.

⁶⁷ Preserved Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 344.

⁶⁸ Whitford, "Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence," 3–4.

sayings, and laws agree. But more of this when I see you. If you have not yet seen the book, I shall take care that you read it.⁶⁹

Particularly interesting about this letter is Luther's position that it is Rome that is the site of "darkness and wickedness." Where Valla was critiquing individuals—the forger, the believers in the forgery, and potentially ignorant current and former popes—Luther attacks the *institutions*—Rome and the office of the pope.

This distinction is made all the more obvious in Luther's letter to the pope. Sent in October of 1520 accompanied by a copy of Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*, the open letter contained tones reminiscent of Valla's overt sarcasm. Luther begins his open letter by stating that recent events had led him to "look to you from time to time, and to think of you."⁷⁰ At first glance, this may not seem to be overly sarcastic, but as editor and translator Tryntje Helfferich notes, Luther uses a more familiar form of the German second person pronoun, thus situating the pope as his equal from the very beginning of his open letter and reinforcing his ideas about the papacy in general, as well as the falsity of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Throughout the letter, Luther insists that he has nothing but honor and respect for Leo X, but at the same time, he calls the Roman Curia "more terrible, more poisonous, and more hateful" than anything "under the wide heavens."⁷¹ Whether Luther viewed Leo X or his office as the antichrist, it was clear that he addressed the man without fear as an equal. Luther concludes his open letter with a veritable line in the sand, telling Leo that: "For me to recant my teachings is impossible, and no one should attempt to force this unless he wishes to drive the matter into an even greater confusion. Furthermore, I will not endure rules for, or limits to, my interpretation of the Scriptures...If these two points are adhered to, then there is nothing else that could be imposed upon me that I would not most willingly do and endure."⁷²

The language is unambiguous here, and almost has to be read as overtly sarcastic. Luther claims that "all" he wants is *carte blanche* to continue as he has been. As long as he doesn't need to recant and isn't forced to follow any rules or limitations, he is perfectly willing to bend. In short, as long as he doesn't have to do any of the things his critics want him to do, he'll be agreeable. He's practically ventriloquizing Valla's overtly sarcastic voice in this letter, nowhere more

⁶⁹ Smith, *The Life and Letters*, 73.

⁷⁰ Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian, with Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013), 5.

⁷¹ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 9.

⁷² Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 14.

clearly than in his closing address/warning to Leo X, where he tells the pontiff not to listen to “the sweet sirens who say that you are not a mere man, but are mingled with God, who can command and require all things. Things will not happen in this way, and you will not be able to make them happen.”⁷³ He is openly challenging the narrative of Rome, and follows that up by telling him not to believe that he has any authority over heaven, hell, or purgatory. If Leo X did read this letter—and there is no record that he ever did, though it was published widely in several languages⁷⁴—there is very little doubt that it would have served only to make a bad situation worse between Luther and the Roman church.

At issue here is the fact that—based on the timeline of events—Valla inspired Luther’s notion of a dark and horrid Rome, and a corrupt office of the papacy, which seems to be a clear mis-reading of Valla’s text and context. While Rome was a disaster at the time of Valla’s *Oratio*, Valla still loved it dearly. He returned to work for later popes after Eugenius IV. Further, the aspects of the *Oratio* that Luther had the strongest reaction to, per Whitford, were those passages that were delivered via *personae* to historical figures. In fact, one such passage was delivered *in the persona* of Pope Sylvester. Valla’s text was more than mere “intellectual violence”—it was a nuanced exposure of a forgery that allowed Valla to deploy overt sarcasm to make his point. This overt sarcasm, however, was *not* aimed at the pope—either the office or the man in possession thereof. More than that, though, Valla’s full text, particularly the later sections, urge reform and offer logical excuses for those—current or historical—who may have been complicit in the forgery. In short, Valla’s *Oratio*, when read as containing two layers of sarcasm, can be read as a corrective—a way to restore Rome to its lost glory in keeping with Valla’s humanist motives, rather than an invective.

This text is an easy one to misread. As Renna suggested, the *Oratio* was written in a style that seems knitted together, almost like a rhetorical exercise with several audiences. The overt sarcasm—which is admittedly far more fun than the subtextual—was true to Valla’s over-the-line style. There were several elements in the structure of the text that would have resonated with Luther, particularly section six, which featured several refrains of “*The Roman church has exercised its authority,*” followed by Valla’s railing against the right of the church to exercise such authority. The Latin for that refrain—*Prescripsit Romana ecclesia*—suggests another reason why this may have appealed to Luther. A more literal translation of the phrase would be “The Roman Church has ordered or directed.” Based on

⁷³ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 14.

⁷⁴ Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 4.

the usage of the term *Praescriptum* in the Code of Canon Law, the translation might be “the Roman Church has legislated”—as *Praescriptum* most often takes on the context of religious and/or civil legislation.⁷⁵ As such, Luther, who responded in kind every time the church challenged him, would have likely resonated with this late section in Valla’s text, where Valla, in his own voice this time, critiques the notion of the church exercising clerical and secular power—legislating, in other words—in clear, unambiguous overt sarcasm. Again, though, Valla is using that sarcasm to address a long-standing conversation on the two swords, not—as Luther seems to have read it—to take down the established church hierarchy.

Ultimately, interpreting sarcasm is an imprecise activity that requires a certain amount of speculation. Even today, arguments crop up over the unintentional reading of—or missing of—sarcasm in Facebook posts, e-mails, and the occasional letters that still get written. If such issues are common when involving texts that are mere minutes or hours old, how much more difficult must it inevitably be when the text in question is nearly 600 years old or, in Luther’s case, 100 years old. As such, it is not my intention to disprove what others have written about Valla’s exposure of the Donation of Constantine, but rather to offer another informed bit of speculation. John Marenbon has written that the ideal way to engage with philosophy is to be aware that “time should have four dimensions”—their [the philosophies/philosophers] present, their past, their future, and the “relation between past thinkers and philosophy today.”⁷⁶ This seems to be a useful approach for addressing this area of time-distorted sarcasm, as well. It limits us to look only at the words on the page, as we are more likely to read our own time and experience into the texts of the past. Valla’s *Oratio* had a present—one where Rome was in shambles, there were several popes in competition for the title, and Valla’s patron was at odds with Eugenius IV. Valla’s *Oratio* had a past—one where it was merely one more voice in a long line of voices addressing the question of whether or not the sword of secular authority and the sword of spiritual authority ought to be wielded by the same man. Valla’s *Oratio* has a relation between past thinkers and philosophy today, as it is recognized as being a foundational text in the philological approach to textual studies.

What seems most interesting about Valla’s *Oratio*, however, is that it had several futures. The short-term future of the text was clearly one that reflected a personal acrimony and a corrective tone. The long-term future saw the text

⁷⁵ Particular thanks are due to Father Peter Mottola, for his helpful assistance in puzzling over this translation issue and for lending his infinitely more refined skill in medieval Latin.

⁷⁶ John Marenbon, *Abelard in Four Dimensions: A Twelfth-Century Philosopher in His Context and Ours* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 1.

burned and black-listed as a site of spiritual rebellion. The most likely explanation for that seismic shift in reputation in just under a century is that Martin Luther—intentionally or otherwise—saw what he wished to see in Valla's text. He took the most vitriolic elements from Valla as an assault on the office of the pope, when Valla's most vitriolic sarcasm was actually aimed at non-papal sources in the personified voice of an historic pope. It seems likely that Luther missed the more subtextual sarcasm outlined above, leading him to learn and embody a different form of "intellectual violence" than that which Valla had to offer. This misreading, in its own way, demonstrates the risks inherent in the very nature of "intellectually violent" sarcasm and, a full century after the fact, perhaps validates the warning that Maffeo Vegio had attempted to convey to his friend Valla in 1434.

