

Title: Lorenzo Valla's "intellectual violence": Personal Feuds and Appropriated Sarcasm

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Much of the critical work done on Lorenzo Valla's oration *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione* focuses on the impact of the text during the English Reformation, nearly 100 years after its initial composition. 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" (86). The key problem in identifying Valla's text as a seed of the Reformation is that Valla wasn't anti-Catholic or even anti-pope. Well after his oration on the Donation of Constantine, Valla was even employed by Pope Nicholas V. Following other scholars, most recently Thomas Renna, I would argue that Valla's text seeks to accomplish two very distinct goals: a return to the values of the church from before the Western Schism, and a strictly personal attack against Pope Eugenius IV, the enemy of his employer, Alfonso V of Aragon. The focus of this paper will be on Valla's use of what I will call layered sarcasm. I suggest that Valla employed two distinct kinds of sarcasm—a more direct, overt sarcastic voice aimed predominately at the forger of the Donation of Constantine, and a more subtextual, covert sarcasm aimed at Eugenius himself.

The overt sarcasm reserved for the forger and his followers was often hilarious, but it was equally pointless. None of what Valla was saying was either new or revolutionary. The Donation had been questioned and doubted several times before, and Valla's biting sarcasm—which included a delightful array of insults including scoundrel, miscreant, and miserable dog—was aimed at a long-dead and unknown forger. Valla also took great pains to be clear where his rage was focused, at one point stating that "my argument is with the man who invented this fiction, not with the outstanding emperor Constantine" (79). He also provides an excuse for the papacy's support of such an obvious forgery, suggesting that papal ignorance of "certain aspects of language," as they were not language scholars, would excuse them in part for failing to notice what Valla has noticed. The excuse doesn't quite hold up to scrutiny, but it does offer an out to the papacy, excusing all except for the forger and anyone, including the current Pope Eugenius, who would still support the validity of the Donation in spite of the proof against it. Eugenius would be left in the unenviable position of either recognizing Valla's argument about the nature of the forgery or maintaining the validity of the Donation, thus losing the convenient excuse of ignorance and instantly transforming that ignorance "into malice and deceit" (149). More interesting is Valla's use of a second layer of "covert" sarcasm—passages and diction that may be inflected and understood as subtextual attacks on Eugenius himself. I would argue that these passages served to goad and ultimately set a rhetorical trap for Eugenius during a period in which his papacy was at its most troubled point, having been "deposed" and replaced by the Council of Basel just one year before Valla wrote his oration.

Ultimately, my paper will suggest that the overt sarcasm that made Valla's text so appealing to the Reformation as an attack against the papacy was appropriated from its true target—the forger of the Donation of Constantine, and that the covert sarcasm, the language that was directed most clearly towards a pope, was deployed as a personal attack, rather than an institutional one. The result will be an understanding of Valla's text as a layered sarcastic document that looks forward towards the Renaissance in its philological process, while simultaneously looking backward, envisioning a return to a time before papal schisms, rather than anticipating the largest schism yet to come. Further, building on David Whitford's work connecting the influence of Valla's text on Martin Luther, this paper will argue that it is likely that Luther misread the intent of Valla's sarcasm, mistaking the target of his "intellectual violence."