

## Reviews

Lorenzo Valla. *Dialectical Disputations, Volume 1: Book I.*

Ed. and trans. Brian P. Copenhaver and Lodi Nauta. The I Tatti Renaissance Library 49. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012. 1 + 398 pp. \$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-674-05576-6.

Lorenzo Valla. *Dialectical Disputations, Volume 2: Books II–III.*

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The present volumes are a welcome supplement to the superb monographic study of Valla's work by Lodi Nauta, *In Defense of Common Sense: Lorenzo Valla's Humanist Critique of Scholastic Philosophy* (2009). Starting with Francesco Petrarca, humanists from time to time expressed distaste or even hostility toward the Latin of the medieval schoolmen. This has often been misunderstood and overstated. To have embraced the *studia humanitatis* and to have valued a classicizing Latin style did not, in and of itself, require a repudiation of scholastic Latin or of university education. Many, if not most, humanists had university educations, especially in law. Valla's education up through the secondary level may have been typical, but at the higher levels he was self-taught. "This applies to more than the field of philosophy," as Mario Fois put it, "in which Valla demolished much and constructed little, and that in his own way" (*Il pensiero cristiano di Lorenzo Valla* [1969], 8–9).

In Valla we find a humanist who was openly hostile to the Latin of the universities and, to be more specific, to the introductory textbook on dialectic and logic of Peter of Spain (before 1250) and probably also to that of Paul of Venice (ca. 1400). In his *Dialectical Disputations* Valla sought nothing less than to demolish the Latin of the schools from the ground up. Aristotle (in medieval translation), Boethius, Peter of Spain, and perhaps Paul of Venice had established a Latin usage that violated what Valla saw as "ordinary language." Valla meant, curiously, by "ordinary language" a Latin written according to sophisticated classical standards, especially as represented in Quintilian (xvii). Copenhaver and Nauta think that Valla had neither the comprehension nor the competence to engage the sophisticated discussions of any scholastic logician in or near his own day. Yet in attacking the technical language of dialectical Latin, Valla was himself forced to resort to technical language. And as the translators concede, they too could only make Valla's objective clear by using technical terms. They also judge his *Disputations* as having had little success in demolishing Peter of Spain, Aristotle, and Boethius, if for no other reason than that the *Disputations* had minimal circulation. Where Valla did have broad success against the scholastic enterprise was with his *Elegantiae*. This work had wide

distribution over centuries and played to the ongoing rise of the vernacular languages that would perforce diminish the role of university dialectic. The rhetorical Latin that Valla so admired could influence vernacular literary usages in ways that the technical Latin of dialectic could not, as it became ever more restricted even within university circles.

Copenhaver and Nauta point out that toward the end of the fifteenth century Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, in a letter to Ermolao Barbaro, comprehended a point that Valla “misses, or wants to miss,” namely, that “philosophers need a language of their own” (xix). One of Valla’s contemporaries who took a similar position, Antonio da Rho, defended the use of philosophic and theological terminology at some length in his *Three Dialogues against Lactantius* (1444). Rho argued that “some things transcend the *studia humanitatis*,” and that divine language did not have to “submit to the precepts of Cicero.” Rho certainly knew Valla and much about Valla’s positions, but it is improbable that he had read or was responding to Valla’s *Disputations*.

Volume two of the present work includes four important appendixes: the first is a translation of an earlier version ( $\gamma$ ) of *Disputation* 1.13: “What is God?” The second is Valla’s letter to Giovanni Serra, in which Valla defends his work but in the guise of making suggestions to Serra for defending Valla against his critics. This second appendix also includes a translation of a section of Valla’s *Defense against the Inquisition of Naples* (1444). The third and fourth appendixes, “Dialectic, Propositions, and the Square of Opposition” and “Some Features of Traditional Syllogistic Logic,” respectively, explain the basics of scholastic dialectic-logic as found in Aristotle and Peter of Spain.

Copenhaver and Nauta have translated version  $\alpha$  of Gianni Zippel’s critical text of the *Disputations* (1982), with a few emendations and modifications in punctuation. The English translation constitutes the first rendering of the text into any vernacular language. It makes available a complex text that demands of the translators a sensitivity to a wide range of Latin styles and vocabulary, in addition to Greek passages (transliterated in the text and translated in the notes). The translation is accompanied by concise and informative notes, an essential bibliography, and a full index. The introduction brings the reader abreast of the historical and intellectual currents of Valla’s day, summing up the fuller exposition found in Nauta’s *In Defense of Common Sense* and Copenhaver’s many studies on Renaissance philosophy. These volumes make available a work by one of the most important Quattrocento humanists. In reading this skillful translation of complicated Latin and sophisticated concepts, one readily sees why this text has been cited more often than read, and even less often understood. Copenhaver and Nauta have more than rendered Valla’s text into lucid English; they have established the framework necessary to understanding the text and the issues it seeks to address.

DAVID RUTHERFORD

Central Michigan University