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God's Rhetoric  
A Therapeutical Tracing of  
*Allegoria in Factis*

Introduction

“On making actions go away” might well be the subtitle of the *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione* that Lorenzo Valla composed in 1440, and which would bring him before the Inquisition at Naples, only a few years after his employer Alfonso V. of Aragon established his reign there. Valla’s oration against the *Constitutum Constantini*, an imperial decree from the early fourth century by which Constantine the Great donated the Western part of the Empire to Sylvester I., bishop of Rome, frequently earns praise as one of the first to use the “tools of historical criticism”, which historians still rely on today.<sup>1</sup> But as shown by the Latin title of his oration, Valla was primarily seeking to expose the falseness of an action, the donation, not the falseness of a document, the *Constitutum*. This in itself is a strange goal from the perspective of modern historical criticism.<sup>2</sup> Such problems only increase upon reading Valla’s oration, where it gradually becomes clear that he consistently attacks the donation by arguing against the people who were involved in its production, even if these people are unknown. In this paper, I will take Valla’s failure to make a clear distinction between actions/actors on the one hand, and documents on the other, as my point of departure for a broad exploration of past relations between historiography, theology, and rhetoric. Ultimately, however, my purpose in producing this broad narrative is therapeutical. This story primarily sets out a fable that speaks of a historian’s relation to the rules of his practice.

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1 Lorenzo Valla, *Discourse on the Forgery of the Alleged Donation of Constantine* [1440], trans. Christopher B. Coleman (New Haven, 1922), p. 3 (in the introduction by Coleman).

2 Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas About Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge, 1975), pp. 33–34.