

POETIC CRISIS TALKS BETWEEN CONSTANTINOPLE AND ROME



By Marc Laureys*

In two verse epistles, written in the months leading up to Pius II's ill-fated journey to Ancona (June–July 1464), Nicolaus de Valle (1444–1473), a Roman humanist and translator of Homer and Hesiod, put on stage Constantinople and Rome as two sisters, the former in dire straits, the latter rushing to help. The two epistolary poems constitute a hitherto little noticed contribution to the debate surrounding a new crusade against the Turks in the aftermath of the fall of Constantinople and evince at the same time the early humanistic reception of Ovid's Heroides, in combination with a variety of other literary sources.

It is salutary to recall to mind now and then how fundamentally our research tools and methods have changed since the advent of the internet. The two texts I will deal with in this paper are a case in point. In 1990, Frans Slits in his invaluable monograph on the tradition of the *laus urbis* in verse had to confess that he was not able to trace the elegiac epistles, in which Nicolaus de Valle (1444–1473) portrayed the cities of Constantinople and Rome exchanging letters in the aftermath of Constantinople's fall to the Ottoman Turks.¹ Today it takes only a few seconds to find these texts through several digital catalogues and databases. The two verse epistles were printed twice in Rome, first separately by Johannes Schurener around 1475–1476, and then together by Stephan Planck around 1488. The composition of the texts themselves has been dated between September/October 1463, when Pius II

* For Marianne, in honor of her scholarship that has illuminated and continues to illuminate the Renaissance humanists' efforts at bridging the Greek and Latin worlds.

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¹ Slits 1990, 339, n. 20.

decided and announced that he would lead a new crusade,² and March 1464, when Pius II's most important ally, the Burgundian Duke Philip III ('the Good'), had withdrawn his support and Pius II in that year's bull *In coena Domini* (traditionally promulgated on the feast of Holy Thursday) threatened to excommunicate all princely rulers, who obstructed the crusade.³

This time frame falls squarely within the relatively short period, 1460–1465, in which the poetical production of Nicolaus de Valle can be situated. His *carmina minora*, all composed during his youth, have to date not received much scholarly attention and remain partly unpublished. Better known are his translations from the Greek, especially his Latin version of Hesiod's *Works and Days*, recently edited and analyzed by Jesús López Zamora.⁴ Nicolaus' translation of Homer's *Iliad* was left incomplete; the project was cut short by his death, at the age of 28. Nicolaus was a scion of a well-known family, De Valle (or Della Valle, in its Italianized form), based in Rome, but with Spanish roots. Several of its members were well connected with the *Studium Urbis* and the papal Curia. Nicolaus himself studied law and was appointed professor of civil law at the Sapienza, but died immediately thereafter. Contemporaries in Rome praised his poetical merits, along with those of his brother Bernardinus de Valle. Giannantonio Campano, a friend of the family, expressed his regret over the brothers' decision to abandon poetry and turn to law instead.

The news of the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans on 29 May 1453 reached Venice one month later and quickly spread from there to Italy and further into the Western world. It was the first spectacular climax of the Turks' advance, and was followed by rapid new conquests in the Balkans and the Mediterranean. By the early 1460s all political leaders of Eastern, Central and Southern Europe realized how massive and immediate a threat the expansion of Ottoman rule posed to them. The shocking announcement of the loss of what had once been the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire (or simply the 'Roman Empire' from the Byzantines' own point of view) prompted a vast flurry of literary texts, in which this catastrophe was

² Avesani 1968, 83–84.

³ Fabbri 1976, 53–54. *Pace* Fabbri, though, Philip the Good is not explicitly mentioned in the second epistle. The reference in the text is only to the collective 'Burgundus', mentioned as one of the international forces, alongside the Germans, the Spaniards, the Hungarians and the English, and couched in a grand scene inspired by wishful thinking. A more logical *terminus ante quem* is the inclusion of the reply letter in the *Carmina epaenetica* for Pius II (on which see below), but that collection is only roughly datable between late 1463 and the death of Pius II on 14 August 1464; see Avesani 1968, 90.

⁴ Valle 2020. See *ibid.*, 8–17 for the most recent survey of his literary oeuvre and the relevant bibliography. The most comprehensive bio-bibliographical overview is De Nichilo 1989. For a few further specifications see De Nichilo 1992, 353–354.

described, lamented, and commented upon.⁵ For the literary historian it is interesting to observe the wide range of literary genres involved and the endless creativity invested in dealing with this topic. In this concert of outrage, lamentation, and despair, Nicolaus de Valle raised his voice as well.

In his two verse epistles he portrays Constantinopolis and Roma as two sisters exchanging letters.⁶ Constantinopolis writes first (362 verses): she bemoans her sad fate, curses the cruelty and depravity of the Turkish forces and their commander, the sultan Mehmed II (1–280), and delivers an emotional plea for a military response, led by Pius II, under whose leadership Rome will live up to her singular renown and restore the world order of old (281–362). In an only slightly shorter epistle (326 verses) Roma replies: she voices her grief about Constantinopolis' misery and shows herself no less angered than her sister by the savagery and viciousness of the Turkish oppressor (1–108). She complains about her own loss of power and prestige and recalls with gloomy nostalgia her former glory (109–152). As if to strengthen her argument, she describes how the personified 'Religio', 'Pietas', and 'Fides' bewail before God the downfall of the entire Christian world (153–168). But here too, the final part of the letter (169–326) strikes a confident note. God – Roma reports – ordained that Pius II ascend the throne of St Peter and lead the campaign to repel the Turks. What follows is an epic evocation of the troops Pius has managed to muster for an upcoming military confrontation with sultan Mehmed. Several participants are singled out for special praise: first of all, the Venetians as a nation, as well as other European nations that rally round the pope, but also individuals, such as Francesco Sforza, Duke of Milan, and Ferdinand I (Ferrante), king of Naples.⁷ Roma's final message to Constantinopolis is one of reassurance and comfort, which blends in with a panegyric for Pius II.

⁵ A rich collection of texts is available in Pertusi 1976 and 1983.

⁶ Henceforth I will use the Latin name of the two cities, when I refer to the personified characters in De Valle's poems. For this paper, I have employed digital copies of the second imprint of both epistles, issued by Stephan Planck, even though the text in these editions, especially that of Roma's reply letter, is marred by numerous printing errors, some of which lead to ungrammatical and/or unmetrical readings. In my quotations I have cautiously normalized spelling and punctuation and I have tacitly corrected the typographical errors. The line numberings are my own. I have also checked the first editions of the epistles, available on microfiche (*Incunabula: the Printing Revolution in Europe 1455-1500*, Unit 53, CA472 and CA473). Of the two manuscripts (on which see below) that contain Roma's reply letter, I was able to consult only the Vatican codex Chig.I.VII.260, available in the Vatican Library's DigiVatLib. Under the current circumstances and within the confines of this article it was not possible to produce a critical edition of the epistles.

⁷ The Vatican codex Chig.I.VII.260 (fol. 184v) contains in this section of the poem four extra lines, in which Ludovico Gonzaga, Marquis of Mantua, is praised for his commitment to the papal army.

The structure of the letters, then, is fairly loose and governed by emotional effect rather than rational arguments. Particularly in Constantinopolis' letter, the usual sequence of *exordium*, *narratio*, and *petitio* can be discerned, although the middle part is not so much a narration of events as a vivid description of the ruthless inhumanity of the Turks. Constantinopolis recites numerous examples of barbaric behavior of Ottoman soldiers and their leader, Mehmet II, and does not fail to mention that she witnessed (41: "ego vidi" [I saw]) some of his atrocious acts, in order to underline her own credibility. Historical examples, such as the corrupt magistrate Verres, are adduced in order to accentuate the far greater extent of the immorality of the Turks – De Valle thus puts into practice the figure of hyperbole by comparison.

Roma's reply is entirely geared towards a panegyric of Pius II. The eulogy of the pope is carefully set up. In the middle section, Roma recalls some of the iconic heroes of her illustrious past and craves for a new champion who may avenge the harm done by the Turks.⁸ That avenger is of course Pius II, who dominates the entire second half of the letter.

Pius II emerges as the pivotal figure, in whom Constantinopolis and Roma place all their hopes at this critical moment in their history. In fact, nearly all of De Valle's poetry falls chronologically within the pontificate of Pius II (1458–1464) and is thematically linked with his papacy. It is no surprise, then, that he joined the many poets who celebrated the most defining concern of Pius' reign. Poetry surrounding Pius' response to the Ottoman threat was triggered in particular by two momentous episodes, the congress of Mantua (1459), in which he tried to muster support for a crusade, and his efforts at assembling a crusading army in 1463–1464, during the last months of his life. Pius himself sustained this political action with intense literary activity, nourished by his humanistic education. His most original contributions to that effect, however, lie in prose rather than in poetry. Pius is credited with developing a new type of political oratory, modelled after the ancient *oratio suasoria*, the practice speech in the *genus deliberativum*, and the crusader sermon.⁹

In his two poems on the fall of Constantinople, De Valle adopts one of the possible poetic variants of this type of political rhetoric, the hortatory verse epistle, and combines it with personification allegory. Petrarch had pioneered

⁸ *Roma*, 147: "Exoriare, aliquis [...]" (Rise, someone), quoted from Virgil, *Aeneis*, 4, 625 ("Exoriare, aliquis [...] ultor" [Rise, some avenger]), but there it is Dido who is praying for an avenger of Aeneas' betrayal. De Valle does not take over a substantive along with *aliquis* and thus somewhat weakens the rhetorical effect of the combination of the second-person verb and the third person subject in the vocative. The motif of vengeance continues to play a role in the second half of De Valle's letter, albeit in a partly contradictory way (as explained below).

⁹ See especially Helmroth 2000.

this literary device:¹⁰ in his verse epistles, he had pictured ‘Roma’ first pleading with Benedict XII (1, 2), and then, this time as a specifically Christian character, with Clement VI to leave Avignon and return to the rightful Roman See. In addition, Petrarch presented himself as a spokesperson for ‘Roma’ in another epistle to Benedict XII (1, 5). In all these letters, ‘Roma’ is portrayed as a grief-stricken old woman, who suffers from her abject condition in exile. The epistles carry a strong elegiac flavor, drawn in particular from Ovid’s *Heroides* and exile poetry; through all these Ovidian collections the topic of separation and abandonment is a central motif, pursued in epistolary form.¹¹ Petrarch’s concept of a lamenting Rome corresponds to the ‘Roma vidua’ (widowed Rome), which we find in both texts and images from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹² It ultimately harks back to the figure of ‘Roma senescens’ (ageing Rome), depicted by late antique authors, such as Claudian and Rutilius Namatianus. The *prosopopiia* (*fictio personae*), through which Rome is granted an auctorial voice, originates from earlier works, such as Cicero’s First Catilinarian oration (1, 18 and 1, 27–29) and Lucan’s *Bellum civile* (1, 190–192), in which ‘patria’ is made to speak as a crisis unfolds.

Petrarch’s adaptation of these prototypes proved an influential model for later representations not only of Rome, the Roman Church or Italy, but also of other cities and countries. The expansion of the Ottoman Empire in Europe continued to be an important context. From the sixteenth century onwards, the Reformation provided another stimulus for such texts. In them, authors could express, not only as individuals but also as representatives of a community, their attachment to their city or country and their support for a religious or political cause. The highly rhetorical nature of these poems links their composition also to school practice. The ancient *suasoria* lived on in the early modern *declamatio* (exercise in oratorical delivery). The personification allegory was informed by the rhetorical figure of *ethopoiia*, which was one of the standard rhetorical exercises (*progymnasmata*) in ancient schools and remained instrumental in literary character-drawing through the early modern age.

De Valle also introduced a distressed and sorrowful Roma in a somewhat different context, namely in a funeral poem for Cardinal Prospero Colonna, who died in 1463. In this piece, Roma joins in with other mourners (58–62)

¹⁰ Dörrie 1968, 42 and 432–436.

¹¹ For the Ovidian background of two of these epistles see Houghton 2011. The modern question of the authenticity of the *Heroides* is of no relevance for De Valle. There is no reason to suppose that he doubted the Ovidian authorship.

¹² The best-known examples are the illustrations in manuscripts of Fazio degli Uberti’s *Dittamondo*, for which see Maddalo 1990, 115–121.

and, speaking to Jupiter and the gods (91–113), expresses her pain and indignation over Colonna's passing.¹³ In De Valle's verse epistles of Rome and Constantinople, the features commonly associated with 'Roma vidua' are far more apparent in Constantinopolis than in Roma itself. It is Constantinople who is depicted as a suppliant, who beseeches her sister to come to her rescue. This pose is reminiscent of the frail Roma we encounter in Claudian, particularly in his *De bello Gildonico* (21–25), where a languishing Roma approaches Jupiter to seek aid, with the city's grain supply cut off by the African prince Gildo.¹⁴

From a rhetorical point of view, De Valle exploited in these epistles the dialogical potential of a *prosopopoiia*. In his quite detailed exposition of its technique, Quintilian explains that the *prosopopoiia* can be adopted in various speech situations, among which also a dialogue between two characters (*Institutio oratoria*, 9, 2, 29–37, at 30). Incidentally, he also points out the possibility of granting a voice to cities and nations (31). There are no examples, though, of this type of personification allegory in hortatory epistles before Petrarch. This option became a prominent characteristic of one specific further development of the medieval tradition of the *planctus*, namely the so-called 'Lamenti', laments in the vernacular about calamities such as the capture of a city or the death of a ruler, usually cast in the form of a *prosopopoiia*. The available evidence stretches from 1342 to 1569 and includes also three 'Lamenti' of Constantinople, most likely all composed in 1453.¹⁵

Whereas these 'Lamenti' only rarely take the guise of an epistle, the dialogical pairing of two verse epistles became a much-practiced literary conceit in the tradition of hortatory epistles in the early modern age. In choosing this literary structure, De Valle connects not only with Petrarch but also with another classical model, namely Ovid's *Heroides*. The last pieces in that collection consist of three sets of paired epistles, exchanged between famous lovers. De Valle's two verse epistles share all four characteristics that are considered constitutive of this genre, which Ovid claimed to have invented or 'freshly coined' (*Ars amatoria*, 3, 346: *novavit*). They are shaped as a letter and designed as an *ethopoiia*; they show affinity with the love elegy and have the persuasive force of a *suasoria*.¹⁶ Combined, these four properties

¹³ The poem is edited in Fabbri 1976, 60–66.

¹⁴ In Cassiodore's *Variae*, 11.13, 'Roma' similarly appeals for help to the emperor Justinian on behalf of the Roman Senate, but her physical appearance is not described in any manner.

¹⁵ For an excellent case-study see Guthmüller 2000. A comparable lament in Latin (*Italia se lamentans*) from the late fourteenth century is edited and analyzed by Haye 2008.

¹⁶ These characteristics are very neatly explained by van Marion 2005, 34–43.

present a strong appeal to the audience's emotions, similarly to the effect intended in the 'Lamenti'. A whole array of stylistic devices, such as apostrophes, exclamations and rhetorical questions, adopted throughout the epistles, serve that same purpose.

De Valle's imitation of Ovid's *Heroides* is quite remarkable. Before his time there are, apart from the Petrarchan epistles mentioned above, only very few instances of the reception of these poems. Not until the mid-fifteenth century do we notice a renewed interest in the *Heroides*, evidenced by compositions in their vein.¹⁷ De Valle, at 19 or 20 years of age, is thus among the first authors to relaunch the verse epistle in the Ovidian manner during the early Renaissance. An exchange of such epistles between two personified cities, however, would always remain exceptional in this genre.¹⁸ Furthermore, De Valle, just as Petrarch, also looked to Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, two collections that provided further models of verse epistles, which Ovid addressed to his wife and friends in Rome.

Not all of the four characteristics mentioned above carry the same weight in De Valle's epistles. Constantinopolis makes clear only in the last distich of her epistle that she is in the process of writing a letter, when she says that her anguish prevents her from writing more (361): "scribere plura vetor, nam me ferus occupat hostis." (I am prohibited from writing more, because a savage enemy seizes me). This is a variation of the closure of Ovid's *Heroides* 14 (131) and *Tristia*, 3, 3 (85): "scribere plura libet, sed [...]." (I would like to write more, but [...]). The formula "scribere plura vetor" appears at the end of Roma's reply as (325) as well. At the beginning of this poem (3), moreover, Constantinopolis' letter is referred to as a "funesta littera" (mournful letter), while in the very first line, there is mention of a "lugubris epistola". This seems to be the *Epistula lugubris*, written by Isidore of Kiev on the fall of Constantinople upon his return to Rome, where he stayed until his death in 1463, around the same time that De Valle composed his epistles. De Valle makes no further effort, however, to uphold the fiction of a letter in the course of his poems, as Ovid did. The separation of the two letter-writers and their

¹⁷ The few examples of reception of the *Heroides* in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance are discussed by Dörrie 1968, 96–103. On the *Complanctus Fedre* (1414) of Pietro de' Putomorsi (Petrus de Lunesana) see also Haye 2013, 357–368 and 376–383.

¹⁸ Worthy of mention in this context are two verse epistles associated with Basinio da Parma: the *Epistula, in qua reliquus ager Picenus ad Asculum loquitur*, of undisputed authorship, and the *Urbis Romae ad Venetias epistolion*, attributed to Basinio. Although they are listed by Dörrie 1968, 537, they do not really qualify as heroides; the first is a panegyric letter for Sigismondo Malatesta, the second a satirical epistle, in which 'Rome' complains to 'Venice' that 'Venice' has erected a statue of the condottiere Erasmo Gattamelata. Some later examples of nations in dialogue, all of them specimina of political poetry against the Turks, are mentioned by Dörrie 1968, 456 and 461.

ensuing distress, an inherent feature of the epistolary situation, are here obvious from their identity as personified cities.

More important is the elegiac mood of the poems. The choice of elegiac distichs as their metre offers a basic indication, but De Valle orients his verse epistles more specifically towards elegy in its original function as ‘flebile carmen’, the characterization which Ovid applies to his *Tristia* (5, 1, 5: “flebile carmen” [tearful song]).¹⁹ The speech situation and the attraction of the reader work differently than in the case of his *Heroides*, but their common intent is to effect the reader’s compassion. To that effect, De Valle has Constantinopolis and partly also Roma paint their own misery in emotional language. The tone is set right from the start in both letters: Constantinopolis had heard that Roma did not manage to hold back tears when she was first informed of the fate of her sister (2: “difficile a lacrimis abstinuisse fuit”) – echoing Aeneas, when he recalls the fall of Troy during the banquet in Carthage (Virgil, *Aeneis*, 2, 6–8: “Quis talia fando [...] temperet a lacrimis?”). In the very first line of her reply, Roma says that she wept (“flevi”) as soon as she heard of Constantinopolis’ hardship. In accordance with the stylistic register thus announced, Constantinopolis and Roma appear in black clothes (*Constantinopolis*, 5: “habitus atros”, 263: “vestes atras”),²⁰ with dishevelled hair (*Constantinopolis*, 7: “scissis capillis”; *Roma*, 7: “scissa comas”; *Roma*, 20: “effusis comis”)²¹ and bloodless cheeks (*Constantinopolis*, 4: “exsanguis genas”),²² just as ‘Roma vidua’ in Petrarch’s verse epistles mentioned above. Through the motif of exile, too, De Valle harks back at the same time to his Ovidian sources and Petrarch’s epistles: Constantinopolis complains that she is “driven forth into exile” (202–203: “exul agor” [twice!]), thus quoting Ovid, *Heroides* 7, 115 and alluding to the opening words of Petrarch, *Epystole*, 1, 5 (“Exul inops” [destitute outcast]).

The compassion provoked by the elegiac fashioning of the epistles is further strengthened by the *ethopoia*, to which De Valle resorts in shaping the auctorial voice of Constantinopolis and Roma. His character creation admittedly never reaches the psychological subtlety and versatility that can be observed in Ovid’s *Heroides*. Of central significance is the close kinship between the two protagonists: they speak as sisters, who once governed the

¹⁹ Cf. Ovid, *Heroides*, 15, 7, as well as Elegy personified as *flebilis Elegia* in his *Amores*, 3, 9, 3.

²⁰ Cf. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.448, among many other instances.

²¹ Cf. Ovid, *Heroides*, 7, 70 (this entire verse is copied), 15, 114 (this entire verse is imitated), and 8, 79, *Metamorphoses*, 4, 546 and 8, 527, as well as Virgil, *Aeneis*, 9, 478, among many other instances.

²² An unknown tragic poet in Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, 3, 26; Statius, *Thebais*, 7, 475.

whole world together (*Constantinopolis*, 259: “Imperium tecum fueram partita per orbem” [I had shared sovereignty over the world with you]). This family bond adds force to Constantinopolis’ plea for help in her plight (295: “Nilque mihi restat nisi te, mea Roma, vocare” [Nothing remains for me but to call upon you, my Roma]) and makes her hope for solidarity more convincing, not least because she sees her sister’s unassailed dominance and primacy confirmed under the rule of Pius II (283–286):

Incolumisque tuos servas, mea Roma, Penates
esque sub imperio facta beata Pii
atque invicta manes ceu quondam invicta manebas
atque invicta Pio principe semper eris.

Unharméd you guard your house gods, my Roma,
and you have become blessed under the rule of Pius II
and you remain unconquered just as once you remained unconquered
and you will always remain unconquered, while Pius is your ruler.

In her reply Roma confirms her close family alliance, describing Constantinopolis in an appeal to God as “altera Roma” (36); Constantinople’s portrayal as Rome’s sister adds another layer of meaning to the multiple dimensions of the time-honored qualification ‘second Rome’. Roma, however, evokes solidarity in another sense as well. Contrary to what Constantinopolis seems to assume, Roma sets forth that she too suffered decay and humiliation in past centuries (131): “Non sum qualis eram;²³ tecum decus omne recessit²⁴” (I am not like I was; together with you, all my charm has gone away). The upsurge of Ottoman power, moreover, puts the status of Rome at risk as well, especially as the capital of the Christian world. To underline the danger Roma faces in this religious context, she introduces further personified figures, ‘Religio’, ‘Pietas’, and ‘Fides’, who share her anxiety (153–156).

Whereas Constantinopolis refers only in passing to Pius II (284, 286, and 358), he takes center stage in the second half of Roma’s reply. Roma hails Pius II as the architect of a victory over the Turks and the restoration of Christendom, also in Constantinople, under God’s blessing (181–188):

Aeternum molitur opus cum laude perenni
sperat et ultorem se fore posse tuum.
Tum polluta Fides et Religionis honores
ante oculos errant nocte dieque Pii.
Affusae genibus lacrimas lamentaque fundunt
et bellum Turcis exitiale rogant.

²³ Quoted from Horace, *Carmina*, 4, 1, 3, but Horace uses the phrase in an erotic context.

²⁴ Cf. Ovid, *Heroides*, 13, 23.

Ille igitur tanta rerum caligine pulsus
non sine caelesti numine bella parat.

He undertakes an everlasting action that will be praised forever
and he hopes that he can be your avenger.

At that time tainted Faith and the honors of Religion
roam day and night before Pius' eyes.

Prostrate on their knees, they shed tears and pour out laments
and demand a destructive war against the Turks.

Thereupon, driven by such a gloomy state of affairs,
he prepares for war not without divine assent.

In a proleptic vision Roma sees a broad coalition assembling and preparing to wage war against Mehmed II. Roma closes her letter by announcing that she, too, will join this armed force (325–326): “Scribere plura vetor, celerant in proelia gentes. | Me quoque apostolicus miles ad arma vocat.” (I am prohibited from writing more, the nations hasten to the battle. The papal soldier calls me too to arms) – an allusion to the bull *Vocavit nos pius*, issued by Pius II on 13 October 1458 and summoning all European princes to Mantua in order to prepare for a crusade.

The persuasive power of Roma's reply rests entirely on her recommendation of Pius II as her and Constantinopolis' rescuer. Roma's extensive praise of Pius II is her main argument in her effort to convince Constantinopolis not to despair but rather to trust that the disaster that has struck her will be overcome. Only Constantinopolis' epistle, however, can be termed a *suasoria* in the sense that Constantinopolis tries to persuade her sister to a specific course of action, namely to come to her aid. She does so by employing several topoi of the rhetorical *conquestio* (bemoaning), outlined in great detail in Cicero's *De inventione* (1, 106–109).²⁵ Roma's reply letter is not a *suasoria* in the strict sense. Roma aims to reassure her sister, rather than to induce her to take any particular action. The exhortatory nature of her epistle, and by extension the pair of epistles, is not only directed intratextually to the epistolary partner, but also extratextually, and surely more importantly, to De Valle's readership.

²⁵ A shorter version of this exposition can be found in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, 2, 50. In ancient rhetorical theory, the *conquestio* (or *commiseratio*) is a traditional feature of the epilogue of a forensic speech. A typical phrase in this kind of rhetorical prose is “me miserum/miseram”; see e.g. Cicero, *Pro Milone*, 102 and Quintilian's analysis in *Institutio oratoria*, 11, 3, 170 and 172. This phrase then became a favorite in Ovid's elegiac poetry (45 occurrences). De Valle employs “me miseram” in the opening of Roma's letter (2) as a further mark of its stylistic register, and repeats it four times throughout the text (79, 89, 110, and 164). In both epistles, De Valle does not shrink back from repeating the same *iuncturae* several times.

With his verse epistles, De Valle participated in the literary campaign of support for Pius II's crusade against the Turks.²⁶ Unfortunately, we know hardly anything about the circulation and reception of De Valle's poems. At least Roma's reply was appreciated in papal circles, since it was included among the *Carmina epaenetica* for Pius II.²⁷ Accordingly, it is preserved in the two manuscripts transmitting the *Carmina epaenetica*, the Vatican codex Chig.I.VII.260, and Trieste, Biblioteca civica "Attilio Hortis", Enea Silvio Piccolomini e Famiglia Piccolomini, ms. Picc. II 25. Whether the other letter was not noticed or discarded for that collection, remains unclear. No manuscript witness of the other letter is known to have survived.²⁸ In any case, the two incunabula editions of both letters later in the fifteenth century prove that they had not disappeared from view. I have not been able to find any traces, however, of a later literary reception of De Valle's epistles. The Chigi manuscript contains a number of readings that reflect authorial variants with respect to the printed editions. Most conspicuously, it lacks verses 229–238, whilst it has four additional verses (between 248 and 249), of which the first two are similar to 229–230.²⁹ At least in the case of Roma's letter, therefore, the printed editions are based on another stage in the composition of the poem than the version offered for the *Carmina epaenetica*. If we assume that it was De Valle's ambition to have the poem inserted in the collection planned for the pope, the printed version is probably drawn from an earlier rather than a later stage, since there would be no obvious reason for De Valle to keep polishing his poem afterwards.

²⁶ Helmrath 2000, 299–300, notes that both Pius II's own poetry on the Turks and numerous *Exhortationes in Turcos*, composed by poets from his environment, are awaiting an in-depth investigation. Pius' best-known poem in this respect is a verse epistle in elegiac distichs (Inc.: "Turcha, paras alte subvertere moenia Romae"), also included in the *Carmina epaenetica* (Avesani 1968, 35–36).

²⁷ Avesani 1968, 83–84. De Valle's first efforts (at 14 or 15 years of age!) to enter the literary circle surrounding Pius II are evinced by two small paratexts that accompany his *Ad Pium pontificem maximum contra Teucros exhortatio*, edited by Bianchi 1988, 138–139, along with the *Exhortatio* itself, *ibid.*, 139–147. The first is a poem, addressed to Jacopo Ammannati, who was admitted into Pius' household in 1460; in it, De Valle asks Ammannati to review the *Exhortatio* and, if it stands the test, to pass it on to the pope. The second is a short letter in prose, addressed to the pope himself and containing an entreaty to receive the *Exhortatio* with benignity. Ammannati may also have been involved in assembling the *Carmina epaenetica*.

²⁸ The manuscript indicated in Valle 2020, 10, n. 30 (Città del Vaticano, *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*, Ottob. Lat. 2348) is a mistake. It contains another poem of De Valle: see *ibid.*, 9, n. 29.

²⁹ Other possible variants that may go back to De Valle himself, rather than to a scribe (I list the variant in the Chigi ms. first): *corruit*[*concidit*] (44), *germana*[*regina*] (65), *tradidit*[*reddidit*] (89), *medio*[*Stygio*] (106), *tenet*[*gerit*] (196).

In his poetic letters, De Valle incorporates all the novel characteristics of the discourse on crusades that developed in the fifteenth century.³⁰ First of all, instead of the liberation of Jerusalem from the control of Mamluk sultans, Constantinople and the Ottoman threat became the primary concern. Accordingly, in both epistles the violent cruelty, moral depravity, and sexual deviances of the Turks are painted at length in graphic terms, expressing images that became topical in the fifteenth century and are derived in part from the ancient ‘*urbs capta*’ motif (Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 8, 3, 67–70). These sections are part of the rhetorical strategy of arousing compassion, notably by means of the first topos listed in the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*: the contrast between former bliss and present misery (1, 107). Through them, De Valle also intimates that the Turks endanger the Western world and Christendom alike, two notions that are implicitly equated. In Constantinopolis’ words (325–326 and 332), De Valle thus clearly emphasizes that the war to be launched against the Ottoman Empire will be most just:

Pro quo [sc. Deo] quid dubitas iustissima bella parare,
quando huius sacra es morte redempta, soror? [...]
Crede mihi, nil hoc iustius esse potest.

Why do you hesitate to prepare most just war campaigns for Him,
since you have been redeemed by his sacred death, sister? [...]
Believe me, nothing could be more just than this.

Finally, the eulogy of Pius II and his success in rallying a massive armed force coming from all over Europe is intended to suggest that the time is right for a next crusade, in which victory over a debased enemy is all but guaranteed.

All these points were also repeated time and again in orations, letters, treatises and poems of Pius II himself beginning in the 1430s, well before the fall of Constantinople.³¹ Following Jürgen Blusch, Johannes Helmrath summarized the argumentation in Pius’ main speeches against the Turks under three leading notions: *iustitia*, *facilitas*, *utilitas*.³² All three can easily be recognized in De Valle’s epistles. In addition, De Valle acknowledged the spectacular move Pius II announced in his bull *Ezechielis* of 23 September 1463, namely to take the lead himself in the planned crusade. Interestingly, De Valle also rehearsed a very common element in the discourse on the Turks

³⁰ From the abundant modern literature on this debate, may it suffice to refer to Helmrath 2000 (also containing an excellent assessment of earlier scholarship), Meserve 2008, and Weber 2013.

³¹ Pius’ *Epistula ad Mahumetem* is of course a very atypical case and remains to this day somewhat elusive.

³² Blusch 1979; Helmrath 2000, 294–298.

that Pius II, by contrast, strenuously declined to accept. He not only suggested that the Turks (*Turci*) are descendants of the Trojans (*Teuceri*), but also that by capturing Constantinople, Greece, and further eastern territories of the Roman empire, the Turks took revenge for the capture of Troy by the ancient Greeks. Roma, too, declares (93–94): “*Ultus avos Troiae Byzantia moenia vicit | deque tuo madidam sanguine fecit humum.*” (Having avenged his Trojan forefathers, he conquered the walls of Byzantium and drenched the soil with your blood).³³ De Valle seems to have overlooked that Pius II always opposed that identification.³⁴ In Pius’ opinion, the Turks were simply Asian barbarians and could not be associated with the people who became, through Aeneas, the forebears of the Romans. Another of De Valle’s characterizations would have placated Pius, however. Not entirely consistently within the pair of epistles, but in line with Pius’ self-fashioning, Pius is more than once qualified as “*pious Aeneas*” and in turn described as the avenger of Constantinople’s demise (*Roma*, 193–194): “*En pius Aeneas pietate a matre creatus | debitus effusi sanguinis ultor adest.*” (Behold! Pious Aeneas, delivered by his mother out of piety, is present as the due avenger of the blood that has been shed).³⁵

In any case, this classical perspective evinces a further important characteristic of the crusader debate in the fifteenth century (at least in Italy), namely the influence of Renaissance humanism. It is probably not without significance that De Valle speaks of ‘Constantinopolis’ and not ‘Byzantium’. Constantinopolis and Roma appear as the former capitals of the Roman Empire, two cities that share the same classical and Christian tradition. The centuries-old differences between Western and Eastern Christianity are entirely glossed over, and Rome’s authority is taken for granted. Especially catastrophic, however, is the loss of Greek culture. Not only has Greece been ruined “*pro religione tuenda*” (on account of protecting [Christian] religion), but Constantinopolis laments that “*et cecidit mecum Graecae facundia linguae*” (the eloquence of the Greek language fell down with me, too) (275 and 277). Pius II himself had already deplored this in his second important speech on the fall of Constantinople, held on 15 October 1454 at the Imperial Diet in Frankfurt, when he called the conquered city a “*vetustae sapientiae monumentum*”, “*domicilium litterarum*”, and “*arx summa philosophiae*”

³³ “*Ultus avos Troiae*” is taken over from Virgil, *Aeneis*, 6, 840, but the subject there is the Roman general Aemilius Paullus, so that the Trojans are seen from the Roman perspective as the ancestors of the Roman people.

³⁴ Bianchi 1988, 134–135, observed the same peculiarity in De Valle’s *Exhortatio*.

³⁵ In other respects, as can be expected, De Valle proved to be an attentive reader of Piccolomini’s writings. In *Roma*, 319, he adopts the very rare genitive plural *poetum* (= *poetarum*), probably borrowed from Piccolomini, *Epigrammata*, 24, 18.

(monument of ancient wisdom, abode of letters, highest stronghold of philosophy), in sum the new Athens, the emblem of all that classical Greece stands for.³⁶ De Valle, too, insists on the cultural calamity the fall of Constantinople represents. Constantinopolis' cry for help also serves to underline the importance of the Greek legacy for the West – a legacy De Valle helped to transmit, along with many humanists of his time, through his translations of Hesiod and Homer. In this sense, therefore, the poetic crisis talks between Constantinopolis and Roma also bespeak De Valle's own convictions and ambitions as a humanist poet and scholar.

³⁶ Quoted by Blusch 1979, 86 and 136, from Pius' *Opera*, Basel: [Henricus Petri] 1551, 681.

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