

# Primary Source Readings

## AP European History

### *Humanism and the Italian Renaissance*



#### Document

### 1.6

**Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486)**

Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* has been described as the "Manifesto of the Renaissance." As you read, look especially at Pico's use of syncretism (the blending of philosophical and religious traditions). How does Pico's *Oration* exemplify humanism?

#### Document

### 1.7

**Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine***

Lorenzo Valla's [philological](#) study was instrumental in debunking the myth of the *Donation of Constantine*, a forged document that had formed the basis of the Pope's claim to hold temporal power in Italy. Valla was one of many Renaissance scholars who critically analyzed ancient texts.

# From Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486)

Source: <http://www.cscs.umich.edu/~crshalizi/Mirandola/>

Document  
1.6

**TO STUDENTS:** *Pico della Mirandola's Oration on the Dignity of Man has been called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance" due to its articulation of the core values held by many humanists. In this preface to his 900 theses on religion and philosophy, Pico employs syncretism (the fusion of the Christian and classical traditions) in his praise of man and of man's free will.*

Most esteemed Fathers, I have read in the ancient writings of the Arabians that Abdala the [Saracen](#) on being asked what, on this stage, so to say, of the world, seemed to him most evocative of wonder, replied that there was nothing to be seen more marvelous than man. And that celebrated exclamation of [Hermes Trismegistus](#), "What a great miracle is man, Asclepius" confirms this opinion....

Why, I asked, should we not admire the angels themselves and the beatific choirs more? At long last, however, I feel that I have come to some understanding of why man is the most fortunate of living things and, consequently, deserving of all admiration; of what may be the condition in the hierarchy of beings assigned to him, which draws upon him the envy, not of the brutes alone, but of the astral beings and of the very intelligences which dwell beyond the confines of the world....

God the Father, the Mightiest Architect, had already raised, according to the precepts of His hidden wisdom, this world we see, the cosmic dwelling of divinity, a temple most august. He had already adorned the supercelestial region with Intelligences, infused the heavenly globes with the life of immortal souls and set the fermenting dung-heap of the inferior world teeming with every form of animal life. But when this work was done, the Divine Artificer still longed for some creature which might comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement, which might be moved with love at its beauty and smitten with awe at its grandeur. When, consequently, all else had been completed (as both [Moses](#) and [Timaeus](#) testify), in the very last place, He bethought Himself of bringing forth man. Truth was, however, that there remained no archetype according to which He might fashion a new offspring, nor in His treasure-houses the wherewithal to endow a new son with a fitting inheritance, nor any place, among the seats of the universe, where this new creature might dispose himself to contemplate the world. All space was already filled; all things had been distributed in the highest, the middle and the lowest orders. Still, it was not in the nature of the power of the Father to fail in this last creative élan; nor was it in the nature of that supreme Wisdom to hesitate through lack of counsel in so crucial a matter; nor, finally, in the nature of His beneficent love to compel the creature destined to praise the divine generosity in all other things to find it wanting in himself.

At last, the Supreme Maker decreed that this creature, to whom He could give nothing wholly his own, should have a share in the particular endowment of every other creature. Taking man, therefore, this creature of indeterminate image, He set him in the middle of the world and thus spoke to him:

*"We have given you, O Adam, no visage proper to yourself, nor endowment properly your own, in order that whatever place, whatever form, whatever gifts you may, with premeditation, select, these same you may have and possess through your own judgment and decision. The nature of all other creatures is defined and restricted within laws which We have laid down; you, by contrast, impeded by no such restrictions, may, by your own free will, to whose custody We have assigned you, trace for yourself the lineaments of your own nature. I have placed you at the very center of the world, so that from that vantage point you may with greater ease glance round about you on all that the world contains. We have made you a creature neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, in order that you may, as the free and proud shaper of your own being, fashion yourself in the form you may prefer. It will be in your power to descend to the lower, brutish forms of life; you will be able, through your own decision, to rise again to the superior orders whose life is divine."*

**Oh unsurpassed generosity of God the Father, Oh wondrous and unsurpassable felicity of man, to whom it is granted to have what he chooses, to be what he wills to be!**

# From Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*

Hanover Historical Texts Project: <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/vallapart2.html>

Document

1.7

**Background** (From Wikipedia): *The **Donation of Constantine** is a forged Roman imperial decree by which the emperor Constantine I supposedly transferred authority over Rome and the western part of the Roman Empire to the Pope. Composed probably in the 8th century, it was used, especially in the 13th century, in support of claims of political authority by the papacy. Lorenzo Valla, an Italian Catholic priest and Renaissance humanist, is credited with first exposing the forgery with solid philological arguments in 1439-1440, although the document's authenticity had already been repeatedly contested since 1001.*

I have published many books, a great many, in almost every branch of learning. Inasmuch as there are those who are shocked that in these I disagree with certain great writers already approved by long usage, and charge me with rashness and sacrilege, what must we suppose some of them will do now! How they will rage against me, and if opportunity is afforded how eagerly and how quickly they will drag me to punishment! For I am writing against not only the dead, but the living also, not this man or that, but a host, not merely private individuals, but the authorities. And what authorities! Even the supreme pontiff, armed not only with the temporal sword as are kings and princes, but with the spiritual also, so that even under the very shield, so to speak, of any prince, you cannot protect yourself from him; from being struck down by excommunication, anathema, curse. So if he was thought to have both spoken and acted prudently who said "I will not write against those who can write 'Proscribed,'" how much more would it seem that I ought to follow the same course toward him who goes far beyond proscription, who would pursue me with the invisible darts of his authority, so that I could rightly say, "Whither shall I go from thy spirit, or whither shall I flee from thy presence?" Unless perhaps we think the supreme pontiff would bear these attacks more patiently than would others. Far from it; for Ananias, the high priest, in the presence of the tribune who sat as judge, ordered Paul when he said he lived in good conscience to be smitten on the mouth; and [Pashur](#), holding the same rank, threw Jeremiah into prison for the boldness of his speech. The tribune and the governor, indeed, were able and willing to protect the former, and the king the latter, from priestly violence. But what tribune, what governor, what king, even if he wanted to, could snatch me from the hands of the chief priest if he should seize me?

But there is no reason why this awful, twofold peril should trouble me and turn me from my purpose; for the supreme pontiff may not bind nor loose any one contrary to law and justice. And to give one's life in defense of truth and justice is the path of the highest virtue, the highest honor, the highest reward... Away then with trepidation, let fears far remove, let doubts pass away. With a brave soul, with utter fidelity, with good hope, the cause of truth must be defended, the cause of justice, the cause of God....

I know that for a long time now men's ears are waiting to hear the offense with which I charge the Roman pontiffs. It is, indeed, an enormous one, due either to supine ignorance, or to gross avarice which is the slave of idols, or to pride of empire of which cruelty is ever the companion. For during some centuries now, either they have not known that the Donation of Constantine is spurious and forged, or else they themselves forged it, and their successors walking in the same way of deceit as their elders have defended as true what they knew to be false, dishonoring the majesty of the pontificate, dishonoring the memory of ancient pontiffs, dishonoring the Christian religion, confounding everything with murders, disasters and crimes. They say the city of Rome is theirs, theirs the kingdom of Sicily and of Naples, the whole of Italy, the Gauls, the Spains, the Germans, the Britons, indeed the whole West; for all these are contained in the instrument of the Donation itself. So all these are yours, supreme pontiff? And it is your purpose to recover them all? To despoil all kings and princes of the West of their cities or compel them to pay you a yearly tribute, is that your plan?

I, on the contrary, think it fairer to let the princes despoil you of all the empire you hold....