

Dissertation project  
“Controversies on Astrology in Renaissance Italy (late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries)”

As is widely known, at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century astrology and magic were among the most important topics of intellectual speculation in Renaissance Italy. The revival of Hermetic and Orphic traditions and a profound interest in Jewish mysticism and Hebrew language enriched the “high” culture with new sources, giving rise to an increase of the number of both pro- and anti-astrological texts.

The rise of the Renaissance magic, which can be regarded not only as the anticipation of modern science, but also as a specific religious practice, was conditioned by several translations made by Marsilio Ficino. To comprehend the place of magic and astrology in Ficino’s (as well as in his followers’) doctrines, we have to take into account that for him the knowledge of occult effects and the possibility to exploit them, especially for medical purposes, were inseparably linked with the priestly service and with attempts to create a universal religion. Moreover, controversies on astrology marked an important point in the development of the scientific knowledge in Early Modern Europe. Astrological disputes in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in Italy gave rise to the Renaissance natural philosophy and strongly influenced early modern scientists, including Copernicus, Kepler and Galilei.

Ficino’s writings, that can be regarded rather as a compilation of *topoi* on astrology, include an early treatise entitled *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum* (on grounds of its title Daniel Walker wrongly supposed that Ficino’s treatise had influenced Pico) and Latin translations of Plotinus’ *Enneads* (1492) and of Iamblichus (1486—1489, published 1497), which brought to life some works on magic, astrology and talismans used in medical purposes (*De vita*), on the nature of light and on the Neo-Platonic comparison between God and Sun (*De Sole* and *De lumine*). Three types of texts can be distinguished: 1) medical (*De vita* and *Consilio contro la pestilenza*); 2) Neo-Platonic commentaries, both general (*De Sole* and *De lumine*) and pertaining to particular works by Plato and his disciples; 3) letters and miscellanea, first of all *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*. Even in his works on astrology Ficino was one of the first humanists who attempted to use ancient and medieval sources within the Neo-Platonic tradition, thus influencing a number of his followers (not only philosophers, but also writers, artists and others); therefore we should pay special attention to a textual analysis of his writings.

But it was Ficino’s younger contemporary, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, who provoked a large discussion on astrology in Renaissance Italy owing to his treatise *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.

In his early writings he does not seem to be an opponent to astrology. In *Commento alla Canzone di Girolamo Benivieni* (1485), *900 Conclusiones* (1486) and other writings (*Oratio de hominis dignitate* (1486) and *Apologia* (1487)) he tried to include the science of astrology into his own large philosophical doctrine of *scientia naturalis*. According to Pico, there are some occult sciences that might help the *magus* to find the hidden elements of nature and world structures. Astrology became one of the highest points in this magical hierarchy, the closest to the Kabbalah. These close links with the Jewish mysticism, which was concentrated on the symbolism of the sacred letter, provoked Pico’s particular interest to the Hebrew. As is widely known, Pico’s use of “new language” had a great influence on other thinkers not only in Italy but also in the rest of Europe. Pico did not limit himself to the Biblical and religious aspects, perfectly shown in *Heptaplus*, and created a rather complicated magical doctrine where medieval astrology, Neo-Platonic mystical philosophy and Jewish textual magic were closely interwoven. However, a further analysis of *900 Conclusiones* proves that Pico’s early works do not contain the idea of astrological predestination, though his Neo-Platonic ideas leave some room for

astrological speculations. We should pay special attention to *Heptaplus* (1489) and, first of all, to *Commentaries on Psalms* (he started working on them in 1490, but left them incomplete). In connection with Psalm 18 “Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei” (which had served to some commentators, notably Pierre d’Ailly, as a source helping to legitimate astrological studies), Pico presented his basically Neo-Platonic theory of light, which seems rather close to the interpretation of Marsilio Ficino in *De sole* (1492). But already in his late Neo-Platonic treatises Pico found himself in a difficult situation. Having explained the process of light emanation in *Commentaries*, he had to introduce the concept of substance. However, because of the incompatibility of Neo-Platonic light with Aristotelean physical “materialism”, Pico tried to avoid such a complicated duality omitting the concept of substance. Hence, his future polemics with astrologers, apart from theological motivations conditioned by Savonarola’s influence, had some philosophical reasons, which forced Pico to revise his theory on magic.

Pico’s polemics against astrology includes two main points. The first (and more important) one concerns the textual and “historiographic” criticism of astrology: Pico showed that no one great philosopher or theologian had ever supported the idea of predictions. In addition, proceeding from the critical analysis of astrological terms (in Latin, Arabic and Greek), the young count of Mirandola tried to prove that astrologers had been at variance with each other as regards the use of main occult practices. Another point is the incompatibility of astrological prognostications with physical reality. Thus, Pico makes an important revision of his cosmological and physical ideas. Trying to eliminate the possibility of all astral influences, admitted in his early works, he chooses Aristotle as his major authority instead of Plato. He scrutinizes the main philosophical points related to the subject, such as light, motion, and warmth in Aristotelian terms, referring to *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and *De caelo*. More important is the fact that he finally enriched his philosophical discourse with the notion of “substance”, excluding any chance of straight astral influence, though he allowed for the influences of certain physical phenomena (for instance, high and low tide; his interpretation influenced such prominent commentators as Galilei). Such a shift from Neo-Platonism towards Aristotelianism can be considered as a proof of Pico’s deviation from hermetic, kabbalistic, Neo-Platonic and other occult sources and his return to the traditional Christian views of St Thomas and St Augustine.

Pico’s *Disputationes*, widely spread in various intellectual milieus of Renaissance Italy, gave rise to controversies on this subject. Among those who supported Giovanni Pico’s ideas I would like to mark out Girolamo Savonarola and Pico’s nephew Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola, the editor of Pico’s *Editio princeps* (1496).

Savonarola wrote his own treatise against astrology in Italian and called it *Contro li astrologi*, trying to adapt Pico’s complicated philosophical constructions for common people. Savonarola’s work is homiletic and polemical and contains an ideological reconstruction of Pico’s views on astrology. His follower Giovan Francesco Pico held the same opinion and in his fundamental *De rerum praenotione* criticized all forms of superstitions including magic and astrology, using a largely distorted view of his uncle’s work to justify his position. Perhaps the most interesting supporter of Pico’s and especially Savonarola’s polemics was Saint Maxim the Greek, an Orthodox monk, translator, and religious writer. He came to Italy around 1490 and was so inspired by Savonarola’s sermons that in 1502 became a catholic novice at San Marco, Florence. In 1504, however, he returned to Greece and later was invited to Russia by grand prince Vassily III. His views on astrology, against which he wrote three treatises while living in Russia, had been formed in Italy, probably under the influence of Savonarola’s sermons. These sources, still unpublished, seem to be of great interest, especially because Saint Maxim’s *Epistles against astrology* were a part of anti-Latin and anti-catholic polemics.

Finally, I should mention Pico’s main opponents. In 1498, almost immediately after Girolamo Savonarola’s death, the physician from Siena Lucio Bellanti wrote *Defensio astrologiae contra Ioannem Picum Mirandulam* where he exposed, chapter by chapter, Pico’s errors in astrology. Bellanti’s argumentation is significant inasmuch as he used the same sources as Pico, though read them in an opposite manner; this humanistic basis aspect of the Pico–

Bellanti controversy shows the duality of textual-critical methods in the Italian Renaissance culture. Moreover, Bellanti expressed his own vision on astrology which was similar to the so-called “Christian astrology”, which had been so popular in the Middle Ages. Surely, such relations between Christianity and astrology in Bellanti’s doctrine might be considered as an opposition to Savonarola’s ideas of religious renovation.

In 1494 he published a fundamental treatise *De rebus coelestibus*, one of whose books is specially dedicated to the shortcomings of *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. As one of the modern scholars claimed, Pontano did not try to reply to Pico’s criticism in *De rebus coelestibus*, because a full answer could be found in the whole body of Pontano’s intellectual speculations. As we know, Pontano was a great admirer of the antique paganism, and, consequently, his astrological conception is related to the Latin and Greek determinism. He tried to revive the classical, ancient astrology, based on Ptolemy, Firmicus Maternus and especially such ancient poets as Manilius. In this context, *De rebus coelestibus*, along with some of Pontano’s poems, first of all *Urania* and *De meteora*, had to crown his project. This “poetic astrology”, related to the tradition of ancient astrological literature and revived in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, especially by the famous poet Lorenzo Bonincontri, greatly influenced the later literary tradition.

In addition, we cannot omit such prominent thinkers of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century as Pietro Pomponazzi and Francesco Zorzi. Each of them proposed an astrological doctrine of his own, closely linked with disputes on astrology in Florence in the late Quattrocento. Zorzi, the author of *De harmonia mundi*, where he presented the Christian religion renovated by various elements of Jewish mysticism, was familiar with Pico’s speculations: it was proved that he had carefully studied Pico’s works, especially *Conclusiones*. And it is obvious that Kabbalah, with its ecstatic features, strongly influenced Zorzi’s astrological doctrine. A new Kabbalistic system of the world, described in *De harmonia mundi*, left a large space for astrological speculations rather similar to Ficino’s *magia naturalis*.

Finally, one of Pico’s opponents was Pietro Pomponazzi, the author of *De immortalitate animorum*. Pomponazzi stood far from humanistic movements of his time, remaining true to Aristotelianism. Pomponazzi’s doctrine of predictions was related to his negation of the immortality of souls that consequently led him to the predestination of human life. In *De incantationibus* and especially in *De fato, fortuna et praedestinatione* he explained his deterministic views, based on radical reading of Aristotle; at the same time he completely rejected the Arab commentators’ tradition, trying to “purify” Stagirite.

As it has been shown, in the Italian Renaissance astrology and magic were not only occult sciences in modern sense of the word; they were linked with the philosophy, humanistic studies and even with the religious studies. Despite a rather large number of publications on the subject, it is possible to find considerable space for an original research with translations and analyses of various sources, and I hope to present for the first time a complete image of astrology in humanistic, philosophical, theological and even medical disputes in Renaissance Italy in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries and its influence on the subsequent philosophical and scientific tradition. In my future dissertation, I intend to explore this significant stratum of the Italian Renaissance thought.