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Dissertation project

“Controversies on Astrology in Renaissance Italy (late 15th and early 16th centuries)”

At the end of the fifteenth 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.

Astrological ideas were transmitted to medieval Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries along with various translations of philosophical, medical and theological treatises. The existence of astrology in medieval intellectual discourse was caused by two reasons. First, it was based on ancient astronomical concepts, largely diffused in the Middle Ages thanks to translations of Ptolemy’s *Quadripartitum* (known also as *Tetrabiblos*) and *Almagest*. *Quadripartitum* and its numerous astrological/astronomical commentaries quickly became main source for astrological speculation in medieval Europe. We should notice that most influential astrological “manuals”, such as Johannes de Sacrobosco’s *De Sphaera*, were built upon Ptolemaic treatises. Second, magic and astrology were legitimized by the authority of Pseudo-Aristotle. As is well known, apart from authentic works by the Stagirite, European intellectuals were familiar with several treatises ascribed to him. This list includes *Secretum Secretorum*, *Liber de Causis* and *De mundo*, rich in astrological elements. Hence, the high position of (Pseudo) Aristotle allowed European philosophers and astrologers to legalize their studies.

We can distinguish two main trends in medieval astrological thought. Many thinkers, specifically within religious communities and Roman Catholic Church, considered astrology as a possible source to confirm some obscure dogmas. Thus, Roger Bacon and Pierre d’Ailly tried to prove the divinity of Christ using the doctrine of the so-called “horoscopes of Christ”. On the other hand, the rise of natural philosophy and its development in various scholastic circles

determined the second role of astrology. Along with alchemy and other natural sciences, it seemed to help to understand and explain the structure of the universe. *Magistri artium* from the University of Paris, Pietro d'Abano and Biagio Pelacani of Parma could be considered as the most important representatives of this philosophical movement. Despite several attacks on astrology in the Middle Ages, its role in European intellectual discourse was reconsidered only after the triumph of the heliocentric system.

The rise of the Renaissance magic in the XV century should not be regarded only as the anticipation of modern science, as it is usually done in scholarly studies. At the same time, one should avoid radical opinions, such as Frances Yates's that the Renaissance philosophy was conditioned by magical speculation. To comprehend the "true" place of magic and astrology in the Quattrocento philosophy, we have to take into account that for Renaissance thinkers 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 15th and early 16th centuries in Italy gave rise to the Renaissance natural philosophy and strongly influenced early modern scientists, including Copernicus, Kepler and Galilei.

The central figure in Renaissance astrological and magical discourse was Marsilio Ficino (1433—1499), the leading Italian philosopher of that epoch and the first translator into Latin of Plato and Plotinus, published in 1484 and 1492 respectively. His interest in astrology was stimulated by the works he had translated, including theurgical treatises of Pseudo-Zoroaster, Pseudo-Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus and Neoplatonists, specifically *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* by Iamblichus. Trying to incorporate this theurgical legacy into the Christian history Ficino proposed a new doctrine, called the *prisca theologia*. According to it, before the formation of the Christianity these *prisca theologi* (Zoroaster, Hermes, Pythagoras, Plato and others) expressed Christian ideas, which, in Ficino's opinion, were later accumulated by Christian authors. Thus, in this context magic and astrology, which had become a central point of theurgical treatises mentioned above, received an important role within Ficino's doctrine. It is quite symptomatic that for Ficino the *prisca theologia* had to be considered as the forerunner of the Christianity. He discussed this issue in the treatise *De religione christiana*, where, together with his innovative Christian history and doctrine, he substantiated the new position of astrology and magic.

Despite the originality of Ficino's astrological ideas, some of his writings on the subject can be regarded as a compilation of well-known *topoi* on astrology. The most significant examples are more than classic treatises on the horoscope of Christ (*De stella Magorum*) and on the plague (*Consilio contro la pestilenza*). Moreover, he undoubtedly changed his astrological views over the years. Thus, Ficino's works include an early, quite standard anti-astrological treatise, entitled *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*¹ as well as pro-astrological works on magic, astrology and talismans used for medical purposes (*De vita*) and on the nature of light and on the Neoplatonic comparison between God and Sun (*De Sole* and *De lumine*). Though Ornella Pompeo Faracovi showed that despite the title of *Disputatio*, Ficino had never attacked astrology, but only false astrologers, the development of Ficino's views seemed to be rather significant. It is also worth noting that concurrently with his late astrological treatises, Ficino was working on Latin translations of Plotinus' *Enneads* (1492) and of Iamblichus (1486–89, published 1497), which brought to life new possibilities for astrological speculation.

Thus, three types of Ficino's astrological texts can be distinguished: 1) medical (*De vita* and *Consilio contro la pestilenza*); 2) Neoplatonic 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 the *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 Neoplatonic tradition, thus influencing a number of his followers (not only philosophers, but also writers, artists and others); therefore we must pay special attention to a textual analysis of his writings. Though studies on Ficino's treatises are numerous, there has been no general research on Ficino's astrology that encompasses the totality of his works; some attempts (for instance, articles of Pompeo Ornella Faracovi and Brian Copenhaver) do not expose the problem in full. Moreover, I hope to present the first analysis of astrological elements in the corpus of Ficino's Platonic and Neoplatonic works.

But it was Ficino's younger contemporary, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), who provoked a large discussion on astrology in Renaissance Italy through his treatise *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.

¹ On the grounds of its title Daniel Walker supposed that Ficino's treatise had influenced Pico: D. P. Walker, 'Ficino and Astrology', in Giancarlo Garfagnini, ed., *Marsilio Ficino e il ritorno di Platone*, 2 vols (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1986), vol. 2, pp. 341–49.

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 a *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, Neoplatonic 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 Neoplatonic 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 Neoplatonic theory of light, which seems rather close to the interpretation of Marsilio Ficino in *De sole* (1492). But already in his late Neoplatonic 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. For him, as an author who tried to reconcile Plato and Aristotle while working on the *Expositiones in Psalmos*, it was obvious that the Neoplatonic doctrine of light contradicted the Aristotelian physics, which postulated the transformation of every influence received by matter. As is well known, Pico's attempt to reconcile two fundamental ancient philosophical systems suffered from his unrestricted manipulation of sources and terms. The best-known example concerns the fragment from Chapter II of *De Ente et Uno*, where Pico, trying to prove the identity of these two concepts in Aristotle's and Plato's works, purposely quoted the text of Plato's dialogue *Sophist* in a modified way. Though he introduced the concept of substance in both the *Heptaplus* and the *Expositiones in Psalmos* to explain the process of light emanation, because of the incompatibility of Neoplatonic light with Aristotelian physical "materialism", he could not go beyond some preliminary notes on the naturalistic aspects of heavenly impulses. Moreover,

this Neoplatonic doctrine left room for further astrological speculation even without references to the determinism, as in Pico's early writings and in all of Ficino's works. Hence, Pico's future polemics with astrologers, apart from theological motivations conditioned by the influence of Savonarola, seem to obtain philosophical reasons, which forced Pico to revise his theory of magic in his last treatise.

Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem is unfinished. Pico worked on it in 1493–4, but his sudden death interrupted his work. Thereafter Pico's nephew Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola published his uncle's *Opera omnia*, which included *Disputationes*. Since then *Disputationes* have been suspected of forgery; even Pico's contemporaries and, above all, his opponents believed that Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola and his companion Giovanni Mainardi changed the text in the interests of their spiritual mentor Savonarola. Some notes as a Giovan Francesco's letter to Mainardi letter could prove this notion², though probably the matter is the philological correction of some obscure and inexact fragments. Moreover, Savonarola himself wrote a work against astrology, which he purported to be a simplification and vernacularisation of Pico's complicated philosophical doctrines, using simple formulas to make it accessible to common people. Savonarola's treatise, written in the Florentine dialect of Italian, is of polemical character. Even after the execution of Savonarola the physician Lucio Bellanti accused him of distorting the *Disputationes* in order to obtain certain benefits. On the basis of Giovanni Pico's philosophical achievements in all his other works, Bellanti claims that the *Disputationes* can only have been written by someone who ignores astrological matters. In his *Responsiones* Bellanti doubted the authenticity of Pico's last treatise, and since then some historians have refused to admit the originality of the Pico's text, while others have insisted on the need to perform a statistical analysis³. But it must be said that the emergence of the idea of the distortion of *Disputationes* partly confirms the falsity of such doubts. Lucio Bellanti's treatise is above all ideological and therefore biased: it sought to attack Savonarola and to restore the high position of astrological science, the foundation of which was significantly affected by Pico's and Savonarola's criticisms. Bellanti's conjecture about the inauthenticity of the work must be therefore dismissed as an ideological attempt to bring Pico

² See: F. Bacchelli, 'Appunti per la storia de testo delle *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* di Giovanni Pico', in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, 2 vols, 2 edn, ed. E. Garin (Turin: Nino Aragno, 2004), vol. I, pp. XVII—XXVIII.

³ S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): the Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical System* (Tempe, AZ: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1998), p. 172.

back to the ideology revived by Ficino. Therefore it seems quite probable that the text at our disposal is, indeed, an original work by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

Pico's polemics against astrology includes two main points. The first 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 Neoplatonism towards Aristotelianism can be considered as a proof of Pico's deviation from hermetic, kabbalistic, Neoplatonic and other occult sources and his return to the traditional Christian views of St Thomas and St Augustine.

Pico's astrological views have been the subject of numerous scholarly studies over the years. While books by Eugenio Garin, Daniel Walker and Frances Yates, though outstanding in many respects, are largely outdated, contemporary studies, such as the book by Louis Valcke (Paris: Les belles lettres, 2005) and the still unpublished dissertation by Darrel Rutkin (Indiana University, 2002), are full of questionable conclusions. Some gaps have been filled by special miscellanies dedicated to the legacy of Pico and/or astrology in the Renaissance, but there is no research on the development of Pico's astrological ideas from *Commento* to *Disputationes*. Moreover, Pico's last treatise still awaits its detailed analysis.

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 (1452—1498) and Pico's nephew Giovan Francesco Pico della Mirandola (1470—1533), the editor of Pico's *Editio princeps* (1496).

Savonarola wrote his own treatise against astrology in Italian and called it *Contro li astrologi* (1497), 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 della Mirandola held the same opinion. 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. Giovan Francesco's radical attitude towards astrology was confirmed in the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae* where he, for the first time, used some sceptical arguments against divination. In this context Giovan Francesco's attack on astrology seems to be extremely important as it was the first manifestation of sceptical elements in Early Modern European thought. Perhaps the most interesting supporter of Pico's and especially Savonarola's polemics was Saint Maximos the Greek (1475–1556), 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 in English, seem to be of great interest, especially because Saint Maximos'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 (?–1499) 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.

Finally, one of the most influential opponents of Pico was famous Neapolitan poet and humanist Giovanni Gioviano Pontano (1426–1503). 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 ancient 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-fifteenth 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 sixteenth century as Pietro Pomponazzi (1462—1525) and Francesco Zorzi (1466—1540). 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" the Stagirite.

My thesis will consist of five chapters. The first chapter will be dedicated to the *magia naturalis* of Marsilio Ficino and to those early works of Giovanni Pico that are related to his elder contemporary's theory. The second chapter will deal with Giovanni Pico's anti-astrological treatise. In my thesis, I hope to present an integrated study of this significant work, not concentrating, as all previous researchers have done, on the third book. In the third and fourth chapters I will explore the views of Pico's opponents and supporters, while the fifth chapter will be dedicated to astrological views of Pomponazzi and Zorzi. As an appendix, I hope to present my translation of the Book I of the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. Methodologically, the study will be based on the textual and comparative analysis of various sources, already published or remaining in incunabula.

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. I hope to present a comprehensive picture of astrology in humanistic, philosophical, theological and even medical disputes in Renaissance Italy in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and its influence on the subsequent philosophical and scientific tradition. In my future thesis, I intend to explore this significant stratum of the Italian Renaissance thought.

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