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Pico and the Historiography of Renaissance Astrology

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The last few decades have witnessed many changes in attitudes toward the historiography of Renaissance astrology in general and toward Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Pico’s treatise Disputations against Judicial Astrology (1494) in particular. This paper will focus on some of those developments and their significance for scholarship today.

As he did for the Italian Renaissance as a whole, Jacob Burckhardt in his 1860 classic, The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy, set up the paradigm against which Pico and Renaissance astrology came be measured. Pico was a humanist hero in Burckhardt’s view: Through his syncretism “[h]e was the only man who loudly and vigorously defended the truth and science of all ages against the one-sided worship of classical antiquity” (210). This ability to avoid the worship of classical antiquity was important to Burckhardt because “antiquity . . . was on the side of astrology,” which Burckhardt decried (484). But Pico wrote against astrology, and “his main achievement was to set forth, in the fourth book, a positive Christian doctrine of the freedom of the will and the government of the universe, which seems to have made a greater impression on the educated classes throughout Italy than all the revivalist preachers put together” (Burckhardt 492).

Some twentieth-century scholars followed Burckhardt’s assessment of Pico’s achievement. Ernst Cassirer claimed that Pico sought the liberation of humanity from the shackles of necessity, a theme, Cassirer maintained, that Pico enunciated in the Oration on the Dignity of Man and reinforced and expanded in the Disputations against Judicial Astrology: “To accept astrology means to invert not so much the order of being as the order of value—it means making of ‘matter’ the master of spirit” (The Individual and the Cosmos 118); and astrology failed to make the distinction that “[e]verything physical is subject to strict necessity; everything spiritual rests on freedom and can only be understood in its terms” (“Giovanni Pico Della
Mirandola” 338-346; for a critique of Cassirer, see Copenhaver, “Magic and the Dignity of Man” 305-308 and Craven). Eugenio Garin in 1976 published a work that was translated into English as Astrology in the Renaissance: The Zodiac of Life. In this work Garin suggested that humanist critiques of astrology contributed to its decline in the seventeenth century, and the foremost critic was Pico: “The importance of Pico should not be undervalued. The very angry reaction which constantly broke out against him is proof of the impact of his work” (83).

On the other hand, most writers on Pico in the English-speaking world found him uninteresting and unoriginal. Even Paul Oskar Kristeller, who appreciated Pico, saw Marsilio Ficino as the more important thinker. Those who demeaned Pico wrote with powerful voices. In 1893 Walter Pater published The Renaissance, a work that glorified the period. Pater made Pico the exemplar of Renaissance philosophy but called it a “feebler counterpart” to other aspects of Renaissance culture (27). And Pater believed in Burckhardt’s Renaissance! What about the other side? Avery Dulles, in Princeps Concordiae: Pico della Mirandola and the Scholastic Tradition, made Pico into an unoriginal scholastic. Lynn Thorndike’s monumental, path-breaking History of Magic and Experimental Science was in part an exercise in destroying the validity of what we call the Renaissance. Thorndike wrote about Pico in two chapters. He introduced him by declaring, “One cannot but feel that the importance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of thought has often been grossly exaggerated.... The darling of enthusiasts for the so-called Italian Renaissance, his reputation must decline with its” (4:485). This opens the chapter in which Thorndike handled Pico’s earlier work, particularly the use of magic and Kabbalah in his Conclusions. Thorndike’s personal opposition to astrology, which he felt necessary to affirm in a footnote to his article on asserting the importance of astrology in the history of science (“The True Place” 278, n. 13), did not stop him from further belittling Pico in the chapter dealing with the Disputations. Thorndike sneeringly cited Burckhardt’s claim about the influence of the Disputations and concentrated instead on the negative responses it evoked (History 4: 540-41), thus simultaneously demeaning the Renaissance, Burckhardt, and Pico. The climax of the disputations against Pico appeared in 1981, with William Craven’s Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Symbol of His Age: Modern Interpretations of a Renaissance Philosopher. While making valid criticisms of the excesses and distortions of scholars regarding their understanding of Pico’s work, he ended up giving us a diatribe, in which every aspect of Pico’s thought and work was belittled and derided. While he correctly noted, against Cassirer and others, that preserving human free will was not the main goal of the Disputations, Craven did not recognize that human free will was an important part of the religious world view Pico