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Fabulae and Imaginatio in Gianfrancesco Pico's Thought

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Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533): Faith, Antiquity, and the Witch Hunt

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Article abstract

In Renaissance philosophy, the term *fabula* is often used to mean a poetic or fantastic tale that conceals the truth beneath metaphorical language. This article will focus on a rather different concept of *fabula* found in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's works. To the younger Pico, the entire tradition of Greek and Latin poetry is a *fabula*: that is, a false and immoral narration inspired by demons. In the first part of this article, I will trace the origin of this use of *fabula* to the early Christian apologists. I will argue that Gianfrancesco's intention was to build on this idea through an interpretation of ancient thought that differed from the historiographical model of *prisca theologia* proposed by Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico. In the second part, I will show the close relationship, in Gianfrancesco's philosophy, between *fabula* and *imaginatio*.

Fabulae and *Imaginatio* in Gianfrancesco Pico's Thought

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In Renaissance philosophy, the term fabula is often used to mean a poetic or fantastic tale that conceals the truth beneath metaphorical language. This article will focus on a rather different concept of fabula found in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's works. To the younger Pico, the entire tradition of Greek and Latin poetry is a fabula: that is, a false and immoral narration inspired by demons. In the first part of this article, I will trace the origin of this use of fabula to the early Christian apologists. I will argue that Gianfrancesco's intention was to build on this idea through an interpretation of ancient thought that differed from the historiographical model of prisca theologia proposed by Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico. In the second part, I will show the close relationship, in Gianfrancesco's philosophy, between fabula and imaginatio.

Dans la philosophie de la Renaissance, le terme fabula est souvent employé pour désigner un conte poétique ou fantastique qui dissimule la vérité sous un langage métaphorique. Cet article examinera une définition assez différente de la fabula, telle qu'on la retrouve dans les œuvres de Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola. Pour le jeune Pico, toute la tradition poétique gréco-latine est une fabula : c'est-à-dire une narration fautive et immorale inspirée par les démons. La première partie de cet article retracera l'origine de cette acception de la fabula aux premiers apologistes chrétiens. Je soutiendrai que l'intention de Gianfrancesco était de poursuivre l'œuvre des apologistes en livrant une interprétation de la pensée antique qui se distinguait nettement du modèle historiographique de la prisca theologia proposé par Marsilio Ficino et Giovanni Pico. Dans la deuxième partie, je m'intéresserai aux rapports étroits entre fabula et imaginatio dans la philosophie de Gianfrancesco.

Saving the *fabulae*

The role assigned to *fabulae* (or tales) in philosophy involves areas worth questioning: the relationship between mythical tradition and philosophical knowledge; the function of narrative in dialectical argumentation (especially, but not exclusively, in Plato); the value of the figurative use of language in the search for true meanings.¹ These topics embrace the entire history of philosophy.

1. For an introduction to the meaning and use of the *fabula* (and of the corresponding Greek *mythos*) in ancient culture, see Maurizio Bettini, "Mythos/Fabula: Authoritative and Discredited Speech," *History of Religions* 45.3 (2006): 195–212. For an introduction to differences in the assessment of ancient fables in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Eugenio Garin, "Le favole antiche," in *Rassegna della letteratura italiana* 4 (1953), now in *Medioevo e Rinascimento* (Bari: Laterza, 1980), 66–89. Garin

Yet, in this case, I will limit myself to a consideration of some examples from Gianfrancesco's time, where the term *fabula* is used as an expression of a conceptual content relevant to philosophy.

During the Middle Ages, the *Sententiae in librum Metaphysicae* of Thomas Aquinas offers a "test case" for the evolution of *fabulae* in philosophy. Commenting on the section of the *Metaphysics* where Aristotle discusses the opinions of his predecessors on the *causae primae*, Aquinas justifies Aristotle's reference to myth and to Hesiod with the explanation that there were, in the origins of Greek wisdom, some "theological poets" who had treated "in a wondrous way" (*aenigmatibus fabularum*) the nature of things. In order to do so, they had to hide the truth under the veil of fables (*sub quodam tegmine fabularum*). For this reason, Aristotle considers the cosmogonies that named Ocean and Tethys as the supreme gods (as well as the myth according to which the gods took their oath on the river Styx) to be allusions to water as the *archè* of natural creation.² Although Aquinas recognizes the existence of a tradition in which narrative, metaphor, and images were means for conveying the truth, he still seems to maintain that the *fabulae* were not admissible in philosophical enquiry. According to Aquinas, *fabulae* have the defect of being so impenetrable in their symbols that one cannot fully understand the intentions of their authors: "si enim per *fabulas* veritas obumbretur, non potest sciri quid verum sub *fabula* lateat, nisi ab eo qui *fabulam* confixerit" (For if the truth is covered over with *fabulae*, no one can know what truth is hidden under the myth except the one who has pierced through the myth).³

maintains that the novelty of humanism in the evaluation of ancient *fabulae* lies—even before their possible interpretation through the Christian lens—in the rediscovery and defense of their "poetic" value. As I will seek to demonstrate in this article, through an exclusive reference to the employment of the term *fabula*, Garin's observations seem to be centred more on some authors (Boccaccio and Salutati, for example) and less on others (Ficino and Giovanni Pico), who seem more inclined to value the *fabulae* only for their "philosophical" content.

2. Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia Metaphysicae*, ed. M.-R. Cathala (Turin: Marietti, 1935), 158: book 3, lesson 11, note 3.

3. Aquinas *Sententia Metaphysicae*, book 3, lesson 11, note 3. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated. And later (book 3, lesson 11, note 6) we read: "Dicit quod de iis qui philosophari voluerunt fabulose, veritatem scilicet sapientiae sub fabulis occultantes non est dignum cum studio intendere" (He says that it is waste of time pay attention to those who philosophized by using fables, i.e., by hiding truth under fables).

Unlike Aquinas, many humanists were convinced that ancient myths and poetry were not “primitive” modes of expression for contents that would be better examined with the tools of rational discourse. Instead, they recovered myths and poetry for philosophical research, since they considered them as an expression of elevated truths in the shape of esoteric metaphors. Thus, these intellectuals sought to overcome the enigmas of wondrous tales and to decipher their hidden secrets.⁴

To better understand this point of view, it is worth examining the classification of the *fabulae* in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (1360) by Giovanni Boccaccio. In this text, ancient mythology is read allegorically in order to draw from it religious, cosmological, and moral teachings.⁵ Boccaccio attempts to justify this approach in a well-developed defense of the *fabula*. The term—he notes—comes from *fari* and recalls the practice of the *collocutio*. Thus, whoever looks down on the art of *componere fabulae* would equally have to consider the art of *loqui* to be unsuitable—an absurd conclusion, since the practice of discourse is natural to man.⁶ One could object that fables (and words) are inopportune when they are empty and useless; yet this would be a pertinent observation only if the poets had intended to tell stories with their creations. In fact, the poets wanted to use fiction (*figmentum*) as a covering to hide an illustrative meaning of their *intentio*.⁷

Fabulae, according to Boccaccio, can be distinguished by the type of relationship that exists between *velamen* (metaphorical veil) and content. The first kind of *fabula* lacks truth in its poetic covering. Under this category one

4. The literature on this subject is incredibly vast. Among the many works one could cite, see Ernst H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon, 1985); Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); Daniel P. Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic: From Ficino to Campanella* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975). For a contemporary approach to the subject, see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

5. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie deorum gentilium*, 15:8, ed. Vittore Branca (Milan: Mondadori 1988). On the meaning of the *fabula* in the works of Boccaccio, see Pedro F. Heise, “Le Fabulae di Boccaccio,” *Revista de italianistica* 29 (2015): 72–83; Garin, 69–75; Suzanne Magnanini, *Fairy-Tale Science: Monstrous Generation in the Tales of Straparola and Basile* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 38–40. See also Boccaccio, 14:4, where Boccaccio singles out a parallel between allegorical interpretation of the ancient myth and a symbolic reading of the Scriptures.

6. Boccaccio, 14:9.

7. Boccaccio, 14:9.

finds, for example, fables with talking animals. The second kind mixes the true and the imaginary, as when one reads that Minus's daughters were transformed into fish because they had insulted Bacchus. The third kind seems to be similar to the *historiae*—that is, to true tales—but it is always woven together from fictions and has the aim of teaching moral content. This is illustrated by the case of Ulysses, who was tied to the main mast of the ship in order not to yield to the song of the sirens. The fourth and final kind of *fabula* has no credibility, either in its *integumentum* or in its content, and is the invention of delirious old women.⁸ This last one being an exception, the other three genres of *fabula* have a full “epistemic dignity.” Whoever wants to deny this “dignity” will have to reject en masse many parts of the sacred Scriptures that present *fabulae* and metaphors. Under the first and third categories of *fabula* one clearly finds such stories as Judges 9:7–15, in which the trees of the forest discuss among themselves their desire to find a king, or the parables told by Jesus. The second type of fantastic narrative perfectly describes the expressive modalities of the Old Testament, in which one finds the identical mixture of true and false. Therefore, according to Boccaccio, the theological term *figura* corresponds to what the poets call *fabula*.⁹ Boccaccio's detailed description of *fabulae* and their forms, has the function of supporting a very important argument in defense of poetry. According to the Florentine author, in fact, poets cannot be accused of inconsistency since the images that they use are designed to allude to real content, and the choice of this form of expression cannot be criticized because the same form is found in the sacred Scriptures.

Similar occurrences of the term *fabula* are to be found in Coluccio Salutati's (1331–1406) *De laboribus Herculis*. Salutati echoes Boccaccio in stating that the *intentio* of poetry is to signify something other than what it says, generally with a reference to God, humanity, or natural philosophy. He then presents some examples of allegorical readings. According to the Florentine humanist, one can interpret the six books of the *Aeneid* as allusions to the various forms of the descent of the soul into the body. He also notes how, beyond the wondrous (*fabulosa*) surface of the words, the reader can rediscover ideas that the poet could not have expressed otherwise.¹⁰

8. Boccaccio, 14:9.

9. Boccaccio, 14:9.

10. Coluccio Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, 1.2.2, ed. Berthold Louis Ullmann (Antenore: Padova 1951).

An analogous defense of the art of poetry is in the *Comento alla Comedia* by Cristoforo Landino (1424–98). In his work, the author presents poetry as superior to all other liberal arts. According to Landino, poets can express contents belonging to all of the arts through the delights of the *fingimento*. Thanks to the power of metaphor, poetry is superior to science as it can reach a form of divine knowledge, inspired by God through the veil of the symbol:

Yet, that the origin of poetry is more excellent than the origin of human arts is clear, since the divine frenzy from which poetry has its origin is more exceptional than the human excellence from which the arts originate. [...] We can also add that only the poets, contrary to the practice of other writers, can invoke the divine aid, since they intend the poem as a divine, not human, product, generated by a state of divine frenzy. Democritus, Origen, and Cicero affirm this. For this reason, it is not surprising if the poets are very ancient because since the beginning of time, God wanted his mysteries to be described to all peoples through the poets.¹¹

By tracing the reason for the excellence of poetry to its divine origin and to a providential plan—God chose to inspire the ancient poets in order that all peoples (even non-Christians) might have an intuition of the truth—Landino took a step forward in the defense of the *fabulae*, in comparison to Boccaccio and Salutati. Landino is largely a debtor to Marsilio Ficino's (1433–99) concept of *prisca theologia*, in which the connections between poetry, theology, philosophy, and even “metaphorical” expressions of the truth received a systematization that would remain a reference point for Renaissance culture in Italy and throughout Europe.

Much has been written regarding Ficino and his idea of the existence of a revelation of truth prior to Christianity, which began with the pagan wise

11. Cristoforo Landino, *Comento alla Comedia*, ed. Paolo Procaccini (Roma: Lexis Progetti Editoria, 1999), 257–58: “Ma che l'origine della poetica sia più eccellente che l'origine dell'arti humane si manifesta, perchè el divino furore onde ha origine la poesia è più eccellente che la excellentia humana onde hanno origine l'arti. [...] Possiamo anchora arrogere, che e poeti soli contro alla consuetudine de gl'altri scriptori invocono l'aiuto divino, perchè intendono el poema essere divino, et non humano, et da divino furore procedente. Il che et Democrito et Origene et Cicerone affermano. Per la qual cosa non è maraviglia se e poeti sono antichissimi, conciosia che Dio volle che ab initio e suoi misterii fussino descripti a tutte le genti pe' poeti.”

men who lived before and/or at the time of Moses. Scholars have attempted to reconstruct the composition of this sapiential chain in Ficino's works, as well as to understand the influence of this vision in his projects for the recovery and translation of ancient texts. They have also examined the relationship between this appreciation for the pagan tradition and Ficino's emphasis on the primacy of truth claimed by Christianity.¹²

On this subject, it is worth recalling some points from these studies that are useful for understanding Ficino's relationship between *fabulae* and philosophy. Ficino's *prisca theologia* does not imply a reading of the history of truth as a constant progress and emancipation from ignorance. On the contrary, *prisca theologia* is based on the idea that in the past there was an alternation between moments of the revelation of wisdom and stages of "cultural" decline. According to Ficino, the first phase of the manifestation of the truth goes from Zoroaster to Plato. They are the *prisci theologi*, that is, the wise men, poets, and philosophers who were capable of penetrating and communicating divine mysteries through metaphors. This phase is followed by the Christian revelation expressed by Paul, John the Evangelist, and Dionysius the Areopagite. Then, after a new period of crisis, caused by nothing less than a

12. Regarding the *prisca theologia*, see Sebastiano Gentile, "Considerazioni attorno al Ficino e alla prisca theologia," in *Nuovi maestri e antichi testi: Umanesimo e Rinascimento alle origini del pensiero moderno. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi in onore di Cesare Vasoli*, ed. Stefano Caroti and Vittoria Perrone Compagni (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2012), 57–72; Daniel P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Duckworth, 1972); Charles. B. Schmitt, "Prisca theologia e philosophia perennis: due temi del Rinascimento italiano e la loro fortuna," in *Il pensiero italiano del Rinascimento e il tempo nostro, Atti del V Convegno internazionale del Centro di studi umanistici* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1970), 211–36; Cesare Vasoli, "Il mito dei prisci theologi come ideologia della renovatio," in *Quasi sit Deus. Studi su Marsilio Ficino* (Lecce: Conte, 1999), 11–50; Cesare Vasoli, "Dalla pace religiosa alla prisca theologia," in *Firenze e il Concilio del 1439*, ed. Paolo Viti, 2 vols. (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1994), 1:3–25; Cesare Vasoli, "Da Giorgio Gemisto a Ficino: nascita e metamorfosi della prisca theologia," in *Miscellanea di studi in onore di Claudio Varese*, ed. Giorgio Cerboni Baiardi (Roma: Vecchiarelli, 2001), 787–800; Cesare Vasoli, "Prisca theologia e scienze occulte nell'umanesimo fiorentino," in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 25. Esoterismo*, ed. Gian Maria Cazzaniga (Turin: Leo Olschki, 2010), 175–205; John Monfasani, "Prisca theologia in the Plato-Aristotle Controversy before Ficino," in *The Rebirth of Platonic Theology in Renaissance Italy*, proceedings of a conference held at The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti) and the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, ed. James Hankins and Fabrizio Meroi (Florence: Leo Olschki, 2013), 47–59; Walter A. Euler, *Pia philosophia et docta religio. Theologie und Religion bei Marsilio Ficino und Giovanni Pico della Mirandola* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1998), 210–24.

calamity in the body of the church, divine truth was recovered with profit in the felicitous combination of Christian thought and Neoplatonic philosophy found in the texts of the church fathers and, in particular, the works of Augustine of Hippo. The last phase in this chronology was the medieval Aristotelianism that inaugurated an “age of iron” characterized by a separation between *pietas* and *sapientia*.¹³

One may consider two points emerging from Ficino's narrative of truth: 1) when Ficino decided to return to the texts of the *prisci theologi* or to those of their interpreters, he was not performing an operation of cultural archaeology for the sake of erudition, but effecting a project of political and moral reform. Since Christianity had fallen into decadence and was threatened by impiety, the recovery of the sapiential traditions—which in the course of time achieved a union between wisdom and religion—aimed at resolving the crisis; 2) this program must be considered part of a providential plan. According to Ficino, God inspired all these figures: the ancient pagans who could intuit the truth, along with Paul, the Evangelists, the Fathers, and anyone who had the task of restoring divine wisdom—such as Ficino himself.¹⁴

Clearly, in such a context, *fabulae*, ancient myths, and in general the possibility of doing philosophy through the allegorical interpretation of texts acquire a powerful legitimization. In Ficino's thought, the reading of *fabulae* no longer serves to defend the pagan poets or their works—as in the cases of Boccaccio and Salutati—but becomes the duty of the philosopher who wants to re-establish, both for his discipline and the Christian religion, a point of contact with the supreme truth. The moral and political renewal of the Christian world depended upon this exercise of interpretation. In a well-known letter to Giovanni Pannonio (1434–72), Ficino (in order to reject the accusation that

13. See Schmitt, 212–13, on the differences between Ficino's concept and those of *pia philosophia* and the *philosophia perennis*; Michael J. B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino on the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence: Leo Olschki, 1998), 62; Hanegraaff, 62–63.

14. See Marsilio Ficino, *Lettera a Pannonio*, in *Opera omnia* (ex off. Henricpetrina, Basilea, 1576), 871, and the note in Hanegraaff, 52: “See the very title of Ficino's letter to Pannonius, ‘That divine providence has ordained that the matters of antiquity will be renewed,’ and its repeated references to providence: ‘I have been destined by God to do this work,’ ‘[i]n this age it pleases divine providence [...] to confirm religion as a genus,’ and even in Ficino's horoscope ‘it is signified that a man will renew the ancient mysteries’ (and Ficino is at pains to point out that astrological fate ‘serves divine providence,’ not the other way around, and to refute determinism: ‘our souls are thought to be most free when they accord with the divine will’).”

his work was popularizing the contents of non-Christian cultures) reminds his friend of the core doctrine of the *prisca theologia*. He stresses that the ancients “dressed” the divine truths, grasped through the help of God, with mathematical symbols or poetic images (*poeticis figmentis*), and he writes that Plotinus was the first to strip the veils from this wisdom and to free it from the impious *fabulae* used by pagan poets.¹⁵ Here lies the meaning of Ficino’s proposal: the *fabula* is valuable for the philosopher only if he “consumes” the interpretation of it and, digesting its truth, allows the wondrous images to reveal themselves for what they truly are. Ficino defines the following examples as *fabulae*: 1) Socrates’s myth of the cicadas in the *Phaedrus* (he believes, however, that this example alluded to the nature of demons); 2) the stories of Phaethon, and of Deucalion and Pyrrha (in this instance, he highlights the similarities of this myth with the biblical accounts of the flood); 3) the passage of the *Timeus* in which Plato seems to consider the possibility for some souls to have a second birth or a reincarnation.¹⁶

Even the philosopher Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) shares this use of the term *fabula*, which he employs, for example, to designate many of the myths that he interprets allegorically in his *Commento sopra una canzone d’amore*. In this text, Giovanni distances himself from Ficino’s Platonism, and he demonstrates how, given the general principle of overcoming the literal reception of the ancients, one must consider the possibility of multiple and concurrent metaphorical interpretations.¹⁷ In a passage from the *Oratio de*

15. Ficino, *Lettera a Pannonio*, 872.

16. Marsilio Ficino, “In *Phaedrum*,” in *Commentaries on Plato*, ed. Michael J. B. Allen, ch. 35, p. 170; and *De Christiana religione*, ch. 36 (Florence: Nicolò di Lorenzo, 1474/75). Regarding the influence of Proclus on Ficino’s perspective, see Paola Megna, “Marsilio Ficino e il *Commento al Timeo* di Proclo,” *Studi medievali e umanistici* 1 (2003): 93–135.

17. See, for example, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Commento sopra una canzone di Girolamo Benivieni, omment particolare*, st. 4: “From here you can understand with what great mystery Plato inserted the *fabula* of Alcestis and Orpheus into the *Symposium* and into the oration of *Phaedrus*. Concerning this we see only an anagogical sense agrees with our previously given exposition. Through this sense we make known both the mind of Plato and the profundity of this material. And, therefore, Plato’s intention is to show how in no way can one hope to reach the fulfillment of intellectual beauty, unless, after first abandoning entirely the inferior powers, human life is abandoned along with them. Nor does one love perfectly, with a perfect love, if one does not die for love” (my translation). One finds similar uses of the term in *Conclusiones, Conclusiones in doctrinam Platonis sensibilem et intellectualem*. C. 31; *Heptaplus*, book 4, ch. 5.

hominis dignitate about the excellence of Orpheus's theological poetry, Giovanni speaks about the ambiguous nature of these *fabulae*: "But, as was the practice of ancient theologians, Orpheus covered the mysteries of his doctrines with the wrappings of fables, and disguised them with a poetic garment, so that whoever reads his hymns may believe that there is nothing underneath but tales and the purest nonsense."¹⁸

For one who does not read it correctly, the *fabula*—that is, the highly imaginary dissimulation of the truth—seems to be a *fabella*, which is to say, a joke or nonsense. This is what happens when the reader remains at the surface level, at the level of images invented by the poets and, in appearance, bereft of any connection with reality, and profane to the eyes of Christians. According to Giovanni, however, these images hide a concealed message only for the initiates who believe in the possibility of interpreting them metaphorically. For someone who considers them literally, they are mere *fabulae*, and not an instrument to reach higher concepts. According to Giovanni, therefore, a *fabula* is a very peculiar object. Depending on who reads it, and depending on how and if one decides to interpret it, it can be viewed either as an inconsistent tale or as the formula to decipher divine truths. It should therefore be of no surprise that the authors who use the term *fabula* in this second sense sometimes also employ it in the first in order to indicate opinions to which they give no credence for truth. Occurrences of this type are generally marked by the use of the plural form (*fabulae*, rather than *fabula*), pejorative adjectives (the *fabulae* become *ineptae*, *aniles*), and diminutives or derivatives of the principal name (*fabellae*, *fabulamenta*).¹⁹

18. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 274: "Sed (qui erat veterum mos theologorum) ita Orpheus suorum dogmatum mysteria *fabularum* intexit involucris et poetico velamento dissimulavit, ut si quis legat illius hymnos, nihil subesse credat praeter fabellas nugasque meracissimas. Quod volui dixisse ut cognoscatur quis mihi labor quae fuerit difficultas, ex affectatis enigmatum syrpsis, ex *fabularum* latebris latitantes eruere secretae philosophiae sensus, nulla praesertim in re tam gravi tam abscondita inexplorataque adiuto aliorum interpretum opera et diligentia." English translation, 275.

19. For example, see Giovanni Pico, *Heptaplus*, book 7, introduction. For examples of *fabulae* in a negative sense, see Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, book 5, ch. 14; book 9, ch. 5; for the use of *fabulamenta*, book 6, ch. 16; book 10, ch. 5; book 12, ch. 1. For occurrences in Ficino, see his *De Christiana religione*, ch. 3: "Adolescentes illi rationes huiusmodi nondum attingunt, et quia nihil ferme asserunt, cuius

In the Latin-speaking world, both Cicero and, among later writers, Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636 CE) sometimes labelled *fabula* as a *factio*: a narrative of what did not take place and cannot happen, as opposed to *historiae* and *argumenta*, which are respectively 1) reports of facts and 2) presentations of events that have not been proved, but are possible.²⁰ Ancient stories as material for philosophical inquiry depend, in the final analysis, on two factors: 1) the opinion that truth can be attained even in non-Christian contexts; 2) the conviction that the search for the truth can be legitimately pursued even in forms different from those of discursive reason, that is, through literary images. These very two points are contested and polemically overturned by Giovanni's nephew, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola.

Banishing the *fabulae*

One of Pico's texts where the term *fabula* occurs most frequently is the *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum*. The *fabulae* of which the *Strix* speaks are the stories from Greek and Latin myths and poetry that, according to one of the characters in the dialogue (Phronimus), are a solid proof in favour of the existence of witchcraft, since they provide evidence of an allegedly long historical interaction between men (or women) and demons:

Ph. To me these stories seem to be rather *fabulae* or, if these fables must have a hint of truth, I believed that those birds are not invented by poetry. [...] On the contrary, I think that these birds have appeared under the guise of a deceptive nurse because of actions performed by wicked demons.²¹

non videant rationem, si proprio confidant iudicio, religionem quodammodo negligunt. Nonnulli in hac opinione constituti propter superbiam incontinentiamque, Aristippicis voluptatibus sese dedunt, tandem nihil amplius de religione, nisi tanquam *de anilibus fabulis cogitantes*" (my emphasis); and *Theologia platonica*, book 14, ch. 10, p. 576; book 15, ch. 10, p. 637.

20. Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De inventione*, 1.19.27; Isidore of Seville, *Ethymologiae*, PL 82, 0121A, ch. 40. See Peter G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 59, who argues that Sextus Empiricus is the Greek source for the distinction applied by Cicero.

21. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum*, ed. Lucia Pappalardo (Rome: Città Nuova, 2016), 268: "Mihi potius fabulosum utrumque videtur aut si quid solidae veritatis

Ph. We must believe that poetic fables, if they have a ring of truth, tell about operations of demonic magic, and therefore: Asclepius was given the reward deserved by the magicians, which is atrocious.²²

Ph. But it seems to me more probable that these fables find their origin in the same deceptions of the demons and are not without some ring of historical truth hidden under a lot of vanities, rather than from dreams, as Synesius says.²³

In the passages cited above, Phronimus is addressing three tales from ancient mythology and literature: the stories of the *striges*, birds of feminine appearance who endanger the health of infants by presenting themselves under the guise of wet-nurses;²⁴ the tales of the miraculous healings performed by Asclepius; and the stories regarding the powers of the Bacchae and the women of Thrace. In all these cases, Phronimus states that they allude to “actions” performed by demons. Overturning the perspective that many of his contemporaries held, Gianfrancesco Pico therefore believes that the *fabulae*, if they have any foundation of truth, are literary expressions of a knowledge belonging not to God but to demons. This idea comes from two sources: 1) the cultural ideology to which Gianfrancesco had chosen to adhere, and 2) some conclusions that are typical of Gianfrancesco's own philosophy.

Regarding the first point, it is no mystery that the younger Pico aligned himself with the party of Dominican friar Savonarola, active in Florence and northern Italy at the end of the fifteenth century. In Gianfrancesco's literary and philosophical works, in fact, we find two recurrent topics: 1) the polemic against the lovers of pagan philosophy, who were accused of reading texts that

insit in *fabula*, reor non natas aves illas, non inventas carmine. [...] Sed malorum ope daemonum factum puto, ut ille ipsae aves apparuerint nutricis modo insidiantis.”

22. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 284: “Magiae daemonicae illa omnia, si uspiam fundus extat, *fabulae* referri accepta debent atque huic Aesculapio data est magorum merces, hoc est horrenda.”

23. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 298: “Existimo quae videatur mendatia fortassis trahere potuisse principium ab aliqua similitudine veri. At videtur probabilius ab ipsis daemonum prodigiis non sine aliquo verae historiae fundamento plurimis vanitatibus adumbrato, traxisse fabulas incrementum aliquod, potiusquam ab insomniis.”

24. See Laura Cherubini, *Strix. La strega nella cultura romana* (Torino: Utet 2010), 100–10.

were dangerous for the integrity of the Christian religion; 2) the defense of Savonarola against the reputation of being a false prophet.

Gianfrancesco's attack on pagan philosophy is fully expounded in the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae Gentium et veritatis Christianae disciplinae*. In this voluminous treatise of six books, the author seeks to demonstrate through the arguments of Pyrrhonian skepticism that pagan philosophers—and particularly Aristotle—never managed to establish shared criteria for the discernment of truth. Instead, they divided themselves into many schools, and a perennial discord reigned among them. For this reason, Gianfrancesco states, it is not possible to impose logical rules or contents of ancient philosophy upon Christian theology, or to demand that theology reform itself on the basis of ancient philosophy. Christians in fact possess solid criteria for the truth—that is, scriptural revelation. As such, they have no need of philosophical subtleties and can accept them only if they do not contradict the faith.²⁵ The *Examen* maintains that the choice to *infirmare* (diminish), rather than reconcile, pagan philosophy comes from the example of the ancient Christian theologians who fought philosophy and paganism. It then adds, paraphrasing Augustine, that any possible correct ideas found in the philosophers' texts must be stripped from them as “ab iniustiis possessoribus” (from wrongful owners), since the one source of truth is Christianity.²⁶ The ancient theologians to whom Gianfrancesco alludes are the church fathers and apologists whom Savonarola's circle studied, read, and translated in the attempt to recover the cultural instruments once used to strengthen Christian identity in a primarily pagan world. Despite the fact that in the 1400s paganism no longer took the form of a practised cult, but instead appeared in the humanist recovery of myths, symbols, and philosophies, Savonarola and his followers reused these arguments to fight the return of wicked philosophical and religious practices in a Christianized world.²⁷

25. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Examen vanitatis doctrinae Gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae*, in *Opera* (ex off. Henricpetrina, Basilea 1557), 710–1264. For an analysis of the text see Lucia Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola: fede, immaginazione e scetticismo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 237–338.

26. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Examen vanitatis*, book 1, 738.

27. Anna Morisi Guerra, “Sulle orme di Savonarola: la riscoperta degli apologisti greci antipagani,” *Rivista di storia della Chiesa in Italia* 45 (1991): 89–109; Mario Claudio Vicario, “Zanobi Acciaiuoli e i Padri della Chiesa: autografi e traduzioni,” *Tradizioni Patristiche nell'Umanesimo*, ed. Mariarosa Cortesi and Claudio Leonardi (Florence: Edizione del Galluzzo, 2000), 119–58.

Among the early Latin Christian apologists, the term *fabula* is mainly used to discredit Greek religion. This is the case of Lactantius (ca. 250–ca. 325 CE) in the *Divinae Institutiones*. The poets, he explains, were not liars, since they always took inspiration from a real event that they transformed with fantastic images to render it more attractive to their hearers. The stories about the birth and the deeds of Jupiter, for example, and along with them the myths of Saturn, Gaia, and Uranus, are *fabulae*, since the father of the gods was originally a human being, king, and leader of the people.²⁸ The ancient *fabulae* have a certain link to reality. They are false, but not a pure invention; their falsehood lies in the attempt to elevate material of a much lower class (that is, “human material”) to the level of the divine. Lactantius, therefore, applies a euhemeristic interpretation to mythology by tracing these myths to a human origin.

Augustine of Hippo, the “first of our theologians” according to Gianfrancesco, is the main philosophical source that Phronimus uses in the *Strix* with regards to mythology and *fabulae* in Greek and Latin poetry.²⁹ Augustine, in short, believes that these myths were demonic material. His works consolidate the association between pagan gods and demons—an association that some scriptural verses had already suggested: Ps. 95:5, “For all the gods of the Gentiles are demons”; 1 Cor. 10:20, “But the things which the heathens sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God.” Augustine begins to establish the nature of demonic entities. In his polemic against Neoplatonic demonology, he denies that demons are comparable to rational creatures—good and evil—that are superior to men and able to act within the space between the human world and the divine world, both in order to bridge the two worlds and to tamper with nature through magic. On the contrary, he argues, demons are impure spirits, banished from the celestial heights, and condemned, after their transgression against the divine commandments, to live in the air as in a prison.³⁰ From Augustine’s perspective, the demons are clearly identified with the angels who fell after the sin of Lucifer, so that the damnation of the demons is described in the same terms employed for defining the condition of these

28. Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones*, 1:18–30, ed. Samuel Brandt (Wien, Prague, and Leipzig: 1890, CSEL 19).

29. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Examen vanitatis*, 738.

30. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, book 8:15, 1–2, PL 41, 240–41.

fallen angels.³¹ The entire pagan era that preceded Christianity comes to be interpreted as a long period in which, because of the effect of the rebellion of Satan and of original sin, demons had “reigned” on earth. These demons had convinced men that they were divine and they demanded that humans dedicate cults to them. All of this took place in order to distance the descendants of Adam and Eve from the true faith. Only the incarnation of Christ, and the subsequent diffusion of his message, put an end to this period by relegating the demonic entities to the marginal role of occasional tempters.

Even Augustine paints an uncompromisingly negative picture of *fabulae*. According to the theologian, one could consider the *fabulae* to be mythical tales about the pagan divinities, while also excusing the poets because their tales are expressed through metaphors that refer to something real; in some cases, these tales are susceptible to moral interpretations. Yet theological poetry—he writes in the *City of God*, taking up a passage from Varro that distinguishes theological poetry from civil and political poetry—tells tales of the demons, abounds in lies regarding the divine nature, and cannot be of any use to the Christian, who has already been redirected to the salvation of true revelation.³²

Lactantius and Augustine, whom Gianfrancesco cited in the *Strix* and considered his models even from the time of the *Examen*,³³ are undoubtedly among the sources that he had in mind for his polemical reaction to the conciliatory and inclusive attitude toward the allegedly pagan culture that was spreading at the end of the fifteenth century and aimed at a recovery of ancient poetry. Yet one must note that Gianfrancesco’s “reactionary” attitude also responds to directives, or suggestions, that come directly from Savonarola. The friar of San Marco, in his *Apologeticus de poeticae artis*, explicitly denies the utility of poetry for the education of the Christian. He also expresses skepticism toward the possibility of composing a kind of poetry that has been purged of pagan images. With the following words spoken in a homily dated 14 January 1494, the friar objects to the principle used by some humanists to defend the ancient poets from the accusation of importing philosophical and theological concepts that are incompatible with the Revelation:

31. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, PL 34, 443.

32. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, 6.5.181.

33. See, for example, *Examen vanitatis*, book 1, 718, where Lactantius and Augustine are cited among the theologians who were the first to come out against the vanity of philosophy.

One must know that the Scriptures have two meanings: the first is literal, that is, what the writer intended; the other is mystical, which is divided in three modalities: allegory, tropology, and anagogy. We will now consider allegory. Know that a writing has an allegorical sense if it possess three things: first, it must have a literal sense; second, it must express history, and not a *fabula* (and this is the reason why poetry does not have an allegorical sense); third, it must be part of the Sacred Scripture.³⁴

In short, poems cannot be read allegorically because they are not *historiae*. Savonarola adds that only the Bible can be interpreted as such. By his argument, the friar rejects the correspondence between the figurative language of the Scriptures and any poetical expressions of them—something upon which Boccaccio had constructed the arguments of his *Genealogie*. In turn, he rejects any attempt to rehabilitate ancient myths. His rejection is accompanied by an invective against one of the mythological collections that had the greatest editorial fortune in the Renaissance: the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, against which the friar writes:

Even worse! Was it not he, Ovid, who came up to this pulpit? “Oh,” you will say, “Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is surely good.” But I respond: Ovid is a purveyor of *fabulae*, so say I. Tell me briefly: what did he [Jesus] preach here, Ovid, or how to live as Christians? This is time of which Paul spoke: “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but they will accumulate for themselves teachers, tickling their ears, and they will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths.”³⁵

34. Girolamo Savonarola, *Predica terza, sopra i Salmi* (Venezia, 1534), 19: “Bisogna sapere che la scrittura ha due sensi, uno literale, che è quello che intende colui che compose, e fece quella lettera, l’altro mistico, e questo si dice in tre modi allegorico, tropologico e anagogico. Piglieremo lo allegorico, e sappi che ad volere che una scrittura habbi el senso allegorico, bisogna che habbi tre cose, prima c’habbi el senso literale, secondo che sia historia, et non *fabula*, però che le poesie non hanno senso allegorico, tertio che sia Scrittura Santa.”

35. Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra Ruth e Michea*, ed. Vittorio Romano (Roma: Belardetti 1962), 88: “Peggio ancora, non era egli venuto in su questo pergamo, Ovidio? ‘Oh – tu dirai – Ovidio *Metamorphoseos* è pure buono.’ Io ti rispondo: Ovidio fabuoloso, ché dirò pure così. Ditemi un poco: hassi egli a predicare quassù Ovidio, o la vita cristiana? Egli è quel tempo che dice Paulo: ‘Erit enim tempus cum sanam doctrinam non sustinebunt, sed coacervabunt sibi magistros prurientes auribus, et a veritate quidem auditum avertent, ad fabulas convertentur.’” For a different interpretation of Ovid, see

In the reference to those who follow “teachers of myths,” we hear the echo of a cultural clash of great significance that deserves further attention. As noted by Cesare Vasoli, in the Florence of the 1490s there were rather harsh clashes between two proposals for ethical/political reform: one inspired by Ficino, the other by Savonarola. Both positions flowed from the assertion that the Christian world was in a state of decline, threatened by an external enemy (the Turks in Constantinople) and interiorly shaken by the diffusion of impious doctrines. Ficino isolated the cause of the crisis in the divorce between religious devotion and the spirit of philosophical investigation. Thus, he proposed the study of the ancient tradition that traced this union from the *sapientia* of the *prisci theologi* up to the time of Plotinus. Savonarola, however, maintained that the danger came from the insertion of pagan sources into Christian theology and called for a return to the simplicity of the Scriptures.³⁶ Both Ficino and Savonarola appeared to be “prophets” for a moral and political renewal. Savonarola fought in vain against those who considered him to be an imposter and not a true prophet. The polemic against the status of *fabulae* can be understood in this context. For Gianfrancesco Pico and the other followers of the Dominican friar, it involves the desire to exclude the possibility that the texts belonging to the tradition of the *prisca theologia* could be metaphorical expressions of divine concepts that anticipate scriptural truths. In order to discredit the eschatological proposal of Ficino’s philosophy and to present Savonarola as a true instrument of divine providence, it was necessary to affirm that the only true prophets are those from Judeo-Christian history. From this point of view, we can understand some passages in Gianfrancesco’s works about the figure of

Pietro Delcorno, “La parola di Piramo e Tisbe. L'allegoria della *fabula* ovidiana in una predica di Johan Meder (1494),” *Schede umanistiche* 23 (2009): 68–106. On the diffusion of Ovid in the Renaissance, see Paul Barolsky, “Florentine Metamorphoses of Ovid,” *A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 6 (1998): 9–31. We should recall that the polemic against the recovery of ancient mythology had, among the Dominicans, illustrious precedents: we find traces of it already in the *Lucula noctis* (1405) of the friar Giovanni Dominici, and even earlier (in the first half of the thirteenth century) in the epistolary exchange between the poet Albertino Mussato and the friar-preacher Giovannino da Mantova. See Claudio Mésoniat, *Poetica theologia: la “Lucula noctis” di Giovanni Dominici e le dispute letterarie tra ‘300 e ‘400* (Rome and Pisa: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1984); and Giorgio Ronconi, *Le origini delle dispute umanistiche sulla poesia* (Mussato e Petrarca) (Rome: Bulzoni, 1976).

36. Ficino, *De christiana religione et fidei pietate liber*, in *Opera*, 1, and Girolamo Savonarola, *Apologeticus de ratione poeticae artis*, 242, in *Scritti filosofici*, ed. Eugenio Garin and Giancarlo Garfagnini (Rome: Bernardetti 1982), 211–62.

Orpheus. Orpheus is no longer considered a prophet but an idolater inspired by a demon. We can also appreciate the true reason for Gianfrancesco's recovery of the story that some ancient philosophers went to Egypt and had initial contact with the teachings of Moses—a story that explained their intuition of principles that were close to the Christian religion.³⁷

Savonarola's influence and Christian apologetics are not the only data to keep in mind for understanding Pico's evaluation of the *fabulae*, a term with which, even in the *Strix*, Gianfrancesco labels with a series of concepts that indicate his philosophical position. In the dialogue, we often read terms derived from *fabulor*, a verb that has among its meanings not only "to speak, to express oneself," but also "the practice of creating tales" that we find in the ancient poets:

Demons took various forms: of gods; of terrestrial nymphs; of sea nymphs who were thought to hide under sea waves, and who poked out from the white waves up to the breast to be seen and to arouse male desires.³⁸

The Devil led men desirous of carnal pleasures to wickedness and mixed this sin with the red dye of superstition. [...] In this way, it was told that Orpheus, considered in life to be a prophet, became an oracle after his death, and that his head, chopped off by the women of Thrace, had reached Lesbos, where it had gone to live on the cliff, and it predicted future through the cracks in the ground.³⁹

37. On Orpheus, see Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *De rerum praenotione*, book 4, ch. 9, p. 490; on the Greek sages' journey in Egypt, *Examen vanitatis*, book 1, ch. 1, p. 724; see also *Examen vanitatis*, book. 2, p. 37, in which Pico writes that, after having learned the rudiments of Mosaic wisdom, the philosophers mixed these true intuitions with their *fabulae*.

38. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 280–81 (my translation): "Itaque induebant varias formas Daemones modo Dearum, quae dicerentur, modo nympharum terrestrium, modo maritimarum, quae quoniam sub undis latuisse suoapte ingenio credebantur, ut spectari possent et urere fortius, nutricum tenus extabant gurgite cano. Etiam nebulae spectro occurrebant: ut Iunonem *fabulantur* Ixioni, ex qua supposititium centaurum emersisse finxerunt, aliaque parabant praestigia, quibus deluderent gentes, quibus et indocto et erudito vulgo geminatis fraudibus imponerent."

39. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 324: "Sic libidinis cupidos [Daemon] trahebat in facinus, et superstitionis fucum etiam intermiscebat. [...] Hoc modo *fabulantur* Orpheum, qui Vates habitus, dum inter homines moraretur, postquam rebus excessit humanis fudisse oracula, caputque illud a Thressis mulieribus recisum appulisse Lesbos, rupemque inhabitasse, et per terrae spiramenta vaticinatum."

And the demon was not only so wicked that he attracted women to the carnal pleasures, when nature pushed her to conceive, but it also created impurity and repugnant pleasure, a pleasure against nature; and it promised prizes to those people who experienced it.⁴⁰

Mythology is the telling of a real event, but it tells about the modalities used by demons to deceive humans by pretending to be gods. But in what sense can *fabulae* be considered false if they emerge from a true foundation—that is, from demonic deception? As we have already seen, a first response to this question comes from the same apologetic sources that inspired Gianfrancesco: the untrustworthy nature of the *fabulae* lies in the fact that they portray as “divine” creatures that are actually inferior and rebellious in respect to God. On this subject, Gianfrancesco adds:

Fr. Do you believe in all kinds of stories? Ap. No, the story of Lucian of Samosata is completely a fable, even though it is known with the name “true story.” But there are many other uncertain things, transmitted in double or multiple versions, that are not so different from a fable. Fr. It is true, in fact, that, just as within the darkness of the fables there is sometimes some true light, so among the historical narratives you can perhaps find one true story. The other narratives, unstable because of their falsehood, must to be considered as fables. In fact, the truth cannot be contrary to the truth.⁴¹

In this exchange, Phronimus seeks to convince Apistius, who is a sceptic regarding the existence of witches, of the reality of the *ludum Dianae*, that is,

40. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 434: “Daemon ut oblectaret mulieres in libidinem pronas, natura illas ad conceptum stimulante, sed contra naturam excogitavit spurcam tetramque libidinem, et praemia iis, qui illam paterentur pollicebatur. Aliis aevum perpetuum ut Ganymedi, quem non minus impie quam impudenter vana vetustas rettulit in coelum. Aliis divinationem ut Brancho pastori, cui *fabulabantur* ispiratum ab Apolline vaticinium.”

41. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 406–10: “Ph. Historiam omnem recepturus es? Ap. Minime, nam Samosatena illa meracissima *fabula*, cum sit sub verae tamen narrationis titulo circumfertur. Sed et plurimae sunt adeo incertae, adeo duplicis famae, saepeque multiplicis, ut parum distare videantur a *fabula*. Ph. Rite sentis. Nam ut inter *fabularum* tenebras quandoque nonnihil interluceat veri, sic inter narrationes historicas, quae interse pugnent, unam fortasse veram invenies. Caeterae, falsitate cum labent necessario. Sunt inter fabulas computandae. Neque enim cum vero rixari verum potest.”

the Witches' Sabbath. Yet, first he wants to establish what kind of demonstration his friend would consider to be convincing. Thus, he asks him if he intends to believe any sort of story. Apistius replies by borrowing a distinction that, as was already stated, comes from Cicero: one cannot believe in every narrative, since some are called *historia* (the *True Story* of Lucian of Samosata), but they are in fact *fabulae*, or at least close to *fabulae*, since they are uncertain, variable, and passed on in different versions. Phronimus agrees with Apistius, adding that, when we find different versions of the same story, only one at most can be correct, while the others must be classified as *fabulae* since the truth cannot conflict (*rixari*) with the truth. Before this passage, Phronimus put the *figmenta* of the poets among other examples of what is "false" because it is "varied": "Fr. Whatever is fallacious is, according to its same nature, often variable. What is true is based on simplicity. [...] We can see it in the poetic fables, as they are various and contradictory, and in the histories, often transmitted in two or three different versions."⁴²

We can therefore say that Gianfrancesco inserted poetic figments into the semantic category of "the false," not only because a certain culture taught him to do this but also because he sees in *fabulae* the characteristics that, in his opinion, identify what is not true: variety, multiplicity, and diversity. To Gianfrancesco, the *fabulae* are variable because of the great number of different temptations that demons put into effect in order to attract humans to themselves, and, above all, because ancient sources often transmit the same myth in different versions.⁴³ By contrast, the *historiae* are characterized by truth and are transmitted in a single account. They are, therefore, in line with God and scriptural revelation. Gianfrancesco established such a strict dichotomy in consequence of a reflection upon the psychological modalities of the production of error: *fabulae*, poetry, falsity, and variety fall under a common category because they are all "products" of the imagination. Gianfrancesco's work creates a strong association between *falsum*, *varietas*, and *imaginatio* as early as 1501 in the treatise named *De imaginatione*:

42. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 316: "Ph. [...] Nam quod fallax est, suoapte ingenio, id saepenumero multiplex et varium. Quod verax est, nititur simplicitati. [...] Datur quoque spectare in poeticis figmentis variis atque inter se pugnacibus."

43. On the different ways by which demons deceive, see Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 306: "Volentes itaque tenet, atque ut velint, *variis* utitur artibus"; on the variety of ancient myths, see, for example, the discussion regarding the different versions of the death of Asclepius, in *Strix*, 282–84.

Truly, since all souls are of the same form or nature, and since, as Aristotle in his book *De anima* resolves, their intellect and reason are in their functioning disjoined and separate from the body, as the eternal from the corruptible, therefore false opinions cannot come from these souls. [...] But this has nothing to do with the diversity and contrariety of opinions, since contrary operations follow, not from tension and relaxation, but from contrary principles, forms, or appearances. Still, since souls must employ phantasms while they remain in the body and since these phantasms are at one moment correct and at another moment distorted, now obscure and now lucid, now joyful and now sad, in the same men as well as in different men, in accordance with a variety of causes (about which we shall soon speak), we must therefore confess that the faults of all monstrous opinions, and the defects of all judgment, are to be ascribed beyond all chance to the vices of phantasy.⁴⁴

In this text, Gianfrancesco is trying to establish: 1) where the diversity of opinions that characterizes the history of philosophy comes from; and 2) how it was possible that philosophers expressed the origin of nature and the goal of human life in such differing terms. With a semantic slide of no little account, the problem is suddenly turned into the following question: what does provoke the *fallacia opinionum*? Plurality is immediately taken to be a sign of falsity. Gianfrancesco's belief that plurality is a mark of falsity could be summarized by a rather banal argument: if there are so many diverse judgments in relation to a single field of inquiry, and these judgments differ or contradict one another, we can only conclude that many of these judgments are incorrect and we must then ask what produced them.

44. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *De imaginatione*, ed. Henry Caplan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), ch. 7, pp. 47–48: “Animae namque cum eiusdem speciei naturae sint omnes earumque intellectus et ratio abiuncta separataque suis in functionibus a corpore sint, tamquam perpetuum a corruptibili, ut in De Anima libro Aristoteles decernit, provenire opinionum fallacia ab eis non potest. [...] At hoc nihil ad diversitatem contrarietatemque opinionum facit, cum operationes contrariae non ex intentione remissioneque, sed de contrariis principiis, formis, speciebusve prodeant. Verum cum phantasmatis uti eas necesse sit, dum in corpore manserint, eae tum recta, tum distorta, tum obscura, tum lucida, tum laeta, tum tristia et in diversis hominibus et in eisdem etiam pro causarum (de quibus mox dicturi sumus) varietate habeantur, fateri opus est monstrosarum opinionum omnium culpas et iudicii defectus omnis phantasiae vitiis extra omnem aleam ascribendas.”

Yet, the passage cited above seems to reveal that Gianfrancesco is not reasoning as such. He was formed by a religious tradition that had constructed its apologetical discourse on the opposition between the *dissensiones philosophorum*—the existence of schools of thought that were in competition with one another—and the unity of the message of scriptural revelation understood as the criteria to which we have to conform. Thus, he is not asking, at least initially, what makes a judgment false, but rather why people think differently. Gianfrancesco implicitly believes that this diversity—which is in itself neutral, being the *locus* in which true and false opinions manifest themselves—is contrary to the truth. In his response, he then rules out the possibility that contradictions can come from the senses, which he still considered, along with Aristotle, always to be true in respect to their own sensible objects. Every human, apart from exceptional and limited cases, perceives colours, odours, etc. in the same way because the senses function by becoming in *energeia* (actuality) what the sensible object is in potency. He then reviews the remaining faculties of the human soul. Not even reason and the intellect can be the cause of contradictions of opinions, since reason and intellect in themselves are not linked to the materiality that introduces plurality. Instead, they receive cognitive data from inferior soul-powers, and are equal in all of us, while it is clear that the multiplicity of judgments must proceed from multiple principles.

The imagination, according to this reconstruction, is “responsible” for the production of *phantasmata*, that is, representations/modes of the appearance of things that are always varied. The same person at different times, or different people at the same moment, can have, in reference to the same object of knowledge, *phantasmata* “tum recta, tum distorta, tum obscura, tum lucida, tum laeta, tum tristia” (at times proper, at times twisted, obscure, clear, happy, or sad). Moving upward to the superior faculties, these representations give birth to contrasting judgments/opinions. Gianfrancesco identifies four causes for the variety within imagination: 1) the different human temperaments; 2) the action of angels and demons; 3) an incorrect consideration of common sensible objects; and 4) human free will. These last two factors are explained via a reference to Aristotelian sources, the *De anima*, in which Aristotle had noted that an occasion for error in perception can take place regarding properties such as magnitude or movement that are not exactly “sense objects” of a particular sense, but are rather perceptible by all the senses together; and the

Ethica Nicomachea, in the passage stating that the mode in which something appears (*phainetai*, in Greek, from which comes the term *phantasia*) to people depends on their personal disposition (*exis*), which derives from their habits.⁴⁵ In examining the other two causes of variety, however, Gianfrancesco recalls the theory of “humours”; he does this directly in the case of the first factor, since some non-pathological alteration of the proportions between black bile, yellow bile, phlegm, and blood in the human organism has the capacity to affect the organ of the imagination and to change the character of the data it received through the senses; he does it indirectly in the case of the second, since scholastic theology generally attributed to demons and angels the capacity to “move” the natural elements and to influence men by their ability to provoke tempting or salvific images through a modification of the bodily complexion on which the function of the imagination depends.⁴⁶

We can say that the *De imaginatione* contains theory of knowledge according to which “to know” the truth is to possess mental content that is *like* the external object, that is, to obtain essential qualities of this object. Thus, falsity corresponds to the production of “species” that are *different* from the true, and unique, representation of an object.⁴⁷ Even when Gianfrancesco changes the gnoseological paradigm of reference, moving to a skeptical view that already identifies in the senses the origin of uncertainty, Gianfrancesco does not abandon the strict association between *falsum et varietas*. He explains the defects of the senses with the terminology that he had adopted for identifying the defects of the imagination.⁴⁸

Given these premises, one can better understand the motive behind the condemnation of the ancient *fabulae* in Gianfrancesco Pico’s philosophy:

45. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De imaginatione*, ch. 8, pp. 49–56.

46. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, quaestio 111, articulus 3 co., ed. Leonina, 517b–518a, and Lucia Pappalardo, “Filosofi e streghe,” in Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix*, 187–88.

47. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De imaginatione*, ch. 8, where the origin of error is compared to a refraction and deformation of the various species of the single true image of a thing: “Si enim vitrea specilla diversis in locis ponantur, per quae ipsi oculo rei cuiuspiam imago monstretur, quamquam ea suapte natura una est, unicamque sui similitudinem proferre debet, pro speculorum tamen aut distortorum aut infectorum varietate, varias sui imagines in oculum imprimit, utpote quae aliter a cava superficie, aliter a convexa, aliter a caeruleo dehonestata, aliter a nigro deturpata reddatur.”

48. For example: “Est enim sensus suapte natura verus ni *sit varius*, *varius autem* in diversis hominibus est, et quandoque in eodem, et saepenumero de suis sensionibus,” in *Examen vanitatis*, book 4, ch. 12, p. 1059 (my emphasis).

they are the realm of the virtual, instruments for transforming “the real” metaphorically. Thus, the *fabula* cannot flee the censure of Gianfrancesco, who, in this matter, finds another opportunity to condemn any attempt to deviate from the tracks of a rigid fideism.⁴⁹

49. For an analysis of the conceptual incoherencies of Gianfrancesco's fideism, see Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola*, 281–81 and 339–47; and Pappalardo, “Introduzione,” in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Strix*, 243–47.