

Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



Praenotio, Prisca Haeresis, and Astrology: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola between Savonarola and Giovanni Pico

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Volume 42, Number 4, Fall 2019

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

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URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068578ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068578ar>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Akopyan, O. (2019). Praenotio, Prisca Haeresis, and Astrology: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola between Savonarola and Giovanni Pico. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 135–158.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1068578ar>

Article abstract

This article considers the place of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's ideas within the astrological debates that arose in Renaissance Italy after the publication of the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Gianfrancesco Pico's famous uncle. Published posthumously in 1496, the *Disputationes* incited a rigorous discussion of the status of astrology in various intellectual circles in Renaissance Italy. Gianfrancesco Pico was the editor of his uncle Giovanni Pico's *Opera*, and the younger Pico was also known as one of Girolamo Savonarola's most ardent followers. This article will focus on Gianfrancesco's two main anti-astrological treatises, the *De rerum praenotione* and the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae*. Gianfrancesco's writings reveal his own elaborate ideological agenda and the ways in which he used, in a controversial manner, both his uncle's and Savonarola's arguments in consequent philosophical and astrological discussions.

Praenotio, Prisca Haeresis, and Astrology: Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola between Savonarola and Giovanni Pico

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This article considers the place of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's ideas within the astrological debates that arose in Renaissance Italy after the publication of the Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Gianfrancesco Pico's famous uncle. Published posthumously in 1496, the Disputationes incited a rigorous discussion of the status of astrology in various intellectual circles in Renaissance Italy. Gianfrancesco Pico was the editor of his uncle Giovanni Pico's Opera, and the younger Pico was also known as one of Girolamo Savonarola's most ardent followers. This article will focus on Gianfrancesco's two main anti-astrological treatises, the De rerum praenotione and the Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae. Gianfrancesco's writings reveal his own elaborate ideological agenda and the ways in which he used, in a controversial manner, both his uncle's and Savonarola's arguments in consequent philosophical and astrological discussions.

Cet article examine la place des idées de Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola dans les débats astrologiques qui ont traversé l'Italie de la Renaissance après la publication des Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem de Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, le célèbre oncle de Gianfrancesco Pico. Publiés à titre posthume en 1496, les Disputationes ont donné lieu à un examen rigoureux du statut de l'astrologie dans différents cercles intellectuels de la Renaissance italienne. Gianfrancesco Pico dirigeait la publication des œuvres de son oncle Giovanni Pico, et il était également connu comme l'un des plus ardents adeptes de Girolamo Savonarola. Cet article portera essentiellement sur les deux principaux traités anti-astrologiques de Gianfrancesco, le De rerum praenotione et le Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae. Les écrits de Gianfrancesco témoignent d'un programme idéologique élaboré qui permet de mieux comprendre l'utilisation controversée qu'il fit des arguments de son oncle et de ceux de Savonarole.

Introduction

In 1493, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–94) started working on his anti-astrological treatise the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.¹

1. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*, ed. Eugenio Garin, 2 vols. (Turin: Aragno, 2004). Originally published in 1946–52, this is the sole modern edition of the *Disputationes*. On Giovanni Pico's attack on astrology, see Brian Vickers, "Critical Reactions to the Occult Sciences during the Renaissance," in *Scientific Enterprise: The Bar-Hillel Colloquium: Studies in*

This ambitious project was never completed due to his sudden death in 1494. Published posthumously in 1496, the *Disputationes* incited a rigorous discussion on the status of astrology in various intellectual circles in Renaissance Italy. The editor of Giovanni Pico's *Opera* was his nephew, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533), who was one of Girolamo Savonarola's (1452–98) most ardent followers and was also known as the author of biographies of both his uncle and Savonarola. Although as an independent thinker Gianfrancesco Pico still remains in the shadow of his famous mentors, his writings are crucial to understanding the development of religious and philosophical ideas in the early sixteenth century. Promoting Savonarola's memory, he advanced his own position, which was based on the notion that philosophy could only serve as a handmaid to theology. This article seeks to demonstrate the place of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's ideas in the astrological debates that arose in Renaissance Italy after the publication of the *Disputationes*. It will focus on his two main anti-astrological treatises, the *De rerum praenotione* and the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae*, and on Gianfrancesco's controversial use of his uncle's and Savonarola's arguments against astrology.

Gianfrancesco's philosophical formation was marked by the influence of Giovanni Pico and Savonarola, whom he met in 1492. The impact of these two mentors on Gianfrancesco led him to write two *Vitae*, glorifying both his uncle and Savonarola using several topoi from the Christian hagiographical tradition. An example of this is the description of Giovanni Pico's birth, which the author states was accompanied by the appearance of a flame in the room. In the hagiographic tradition, this signifies the birth of a sage or a saint.²

Despite apparent respect for his illustrious relative, Gianfrancesco attempted to minimize his beloved uncle's passion for theurgic and Kabbalistic

History, Philosophy, and Sociology of Science, ed. Edna Ullmann-Margalit, vol. 4 (Dordrecht: Springer, 1992), 43–92; Ornella Pompeo Faracovi, *Scritto negli astri: l'astrologia nella cultura dell'Occidente* (Venice: Marsilio, 1996), 224–33; Steven vanden Broecke, *The Limits of Influence: Pico, Louvain, and the Crisis of Renaissance Astrology* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003), 55–80; Darrel Rutkin, "Astrology, Natural Philosophy and the History of Science, c. 1250–1700: Studies toward an Interpretation of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*" (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2002); Marco Bertozzi, ed., *Nello specchio del cielo. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola e le Disputationes contro l'astrologia divinatoria* (Florence: Olschki, 2008).

2. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Ioannis Pici Mirandulae viri omni disciplinarum genere consumatissimi vita per Ioannem Franciscum illustris principis Galeotti Pici filium conscripta* (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1994), 32.

writings.³ In the *Vita*, the motif of Giovanni's "re-conversion" from the heretical ideas of reforming the traditional Christian religion back to the Catholic dogma is of fundamental importance. Gianfrancesco recognizes the elegance of Giovanni's Latin style, as well as the depth and width of his knowledge, but points out that his uncle supported magic and astrology in the *Apologia* and *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, or, in his own words, in an "elegant speech" intended for a public dispute in Rome.⁴ Interestingly, he does not mention the 900 *Conclusiones* at all, which was not published in Giovanni's *Opera Omnia* due to an outstanding prohibition on its publication.⁵ According to the nephew, after the Roman dispute, Giovanni finally turned onto the right path. Gianfrancesco admits that the turning point for his uncle's reconversion was his work on the commentary on the Psalms.⁶ He does not mention his uncle's other ambitious biblical project, the *Heptaplus*, probably because of the Kabbalistic basis of Giovanni's exegesis.⁷ The central role of Giovanni's reconversion was ascribed

3. On Giovanni Pico's Kabbalah, see Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989); Brian Copenhaver, "Number, Shape, and Meaning in Pico's Christian Cabala: the Upright *tsade*, the Closed Man, and the Gaping Jaws of Azazel," in *Natural Particulars: Nature and the Disciplines in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Anthony Grafton and Nancy Siraisi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 25–76; Brian Copenhaver, "Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 26 (2002): 56–81; Giulio Busi, *L'enigma dell'ebraico nel Rinascimento* (Turin: Aragno, 2007), 25–45; Brian Ogren, "The Forty-Nine Gates of Wisdom as Forty-Nine Ways to Christ: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Heptaplus* and Nahmanidean Kabbalah," *Rinascimento* 49 (2009): 27–43; Fabrizio Lelli, ed., *Giovanni Pico e la cabbalà* (Florence: Olschki, 2014).

4. In 1486, Giovanni Pico sought to organize a dispute to be held in Rome. There he intended to present his ambitious 900 *Conclusiones*, reformulating and commenting on numerous theological and philosophical doctrines. The famous *Oratio de hominis dignitate* had to become the preface to the dispute. However, the *Conclusiones* was condemned as heretical. Giovanni tried to prove his innocence in the *Apologia*, but only the protection of Lorenzo de' Medici helped him to evade an inquisitional process.

5. Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Ioannis Francisci Pici Mirandulae domini et Concordiae comitis de rerum praenotione libri novem* (Strasbourg: Ioannes Knoblochus, 1507), 5.1.100–01. For the text of Giovanni Pico's *Conclusiones*, see Stephen A. 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).

6. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.1.100. Fragments of Pico's unfinished *Commentaries on Psalms* (1491/92) were united from various manuscripts into one book and published in 1997 by Antonio Raspanti: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Ioannis Pici Mirandulae expositiones in Psalmos*, ed. Antonio Raspanti (Florence: Olschki, 1997).

7. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, "Heptaplus," in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, ed. Eugenio Garin (Turin: Aragno, 2004), 168–382. This text was

by his nephew to Savonarola, who had supposedly influenced Giovanni's late works, including the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*.⁸ Thus, Gianfrancesco's attitude towards the legacy of his uncle was two-sided: severe disapproval of Giovanni's early views, and glorification of his philosophical re-orientation in the late 1480s and early 1490s.

Gianfrancesco was only six years younger than his uncle, but when Savonarola came to Florence in the early 1490s, he appears—unlike Giovanni—not to have developed his philosophical ideas sufficiently to engage in philosophical interactions with Savonarola. Evidence suggests that he was, like many of his contemporaries, profoundly impressed by Savonarola's sermons. The restoration of Savonarola's reputation and the cult around his persona also contributed, at least in part, to influencing the future direction of Gianfrancesco's thought. Gianfrancesco dedicated some of his early writings to Savonarola, who was in correspondence not only with him but also with other members of Gianfrancesco's family.⁹ Gianfrancesco Pico also insisted that there had been a close relationship between the two families in the past: Savonarola's grandfather, the famous physician and natural philosopher Michele Savonarola (1385–1468), was a court physician to the d'Este family and treated Gianfrancesco's mother Bianca Maria d'Este (1440–1506).¹⁰ During Savonarola's trial, Gianfrancesco was among the most fervent defenders of the Dominican friar and even testified against the accusations against Savonarola's follower Pietro Bernardino (ca. 1475–1502).¹¹

Owing to the contributions of Gian Mario Cao, Gianfrancesco is today considered the first Renaissance sceptic.¹² His *Examen vanitatis doctrinae*

first published by Garin in 1942. For an analysis of the *Heptaplus*, see Crofton Black, *Pico's Heptaplus and Biblical Hermeneutics* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006).

8. On the problem of astrology in Savonarola and Giovanni Pico, see Giancarlo Garfagnini, "La questione astrologica tra Savonarola, Giovanni e Giovan Francesco Pico," in *Nello specchio del cielo*, ed. Bertozzi, 117–37.

9. Elena Schisto, "Introduzione," in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola, *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae*, ed. Elena Schisto (Florence: Olschki, 1999), 15.

10. Schisto, "Introduzione," 14. On Michele Savonarola and his impact, see *Michele Savonarola. Medicina e cultura di corte*, ed. Chiara Crisciani and Gabriella Zuccolin (Florence: Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011).

11. Schisto, "Introduzione," 16.

12. Gian Mario Cao, "The Prehistory of Modern Scepticism: Sextus Empiricus in Fifteenth-Century Italy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 64 (2001): 229–80; Gian Mario Cao, "Inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas, et humani, et mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics," in *Renaissance*

gentium, published in 1520, was the first attempt to disseminate scepticism within Renaissance philosophy. His contribution to Renaissance intellectual culture also includes several treatises on demonology, witchcraft, and female prophecy, as in the *Strix* and the biography of Caterina Mattei Racconigi (1486–1547).¹³ In these texts, Gianfrancesco Pico establishes a strict dichotomy between pagan inspiration, which can only lead to demonic possession and witchcraft, and Christian inspiration, which is the only path to ecstasy and prophecy.

For the purpose of this article, however, the most interesting aspect of his intellectual activity is the *De rerum praenotione* of 1507, written in the context of the early sixteenth-century astrological controversies, and which became one of the most characteristic texts against magical and astrological speculation in the Italian Renaissance.

The *De rerum praenotione* and the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae*: *Praenotio versus prophetia*

Although Gianfrancesco Pico's engagement with sceptical philosophy is usually associated with the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium*, which influenced, *inter alia*, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486–1535),¹⁴ we can conclude that he was already influenced by Sextus Empiricus as early as the

Scepticisms, ed. Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 127–47. For general reading on the subject, see Richard H. Popkin and Charles B. Schmitt, eds, *Scepticism from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987); Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

13. Armando Maggi, *In the Company of Demons: Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 25–65; Peter Burke, “Witchcraft and Magic in Renaissance Italy: Gianfrancesco Pico and His *Strix*,” in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. Sydney Anglo (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 32–48. For some excerpts from the *Strix*, see Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, eds, *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 239–44.

14. The Italian edition of the text: Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, *Dell'incertitudine e della vanità delle scienze*, ed. Tiziana Provvidera (Turin: Arago, 2004). On Agrippa's use of Gianfrancesco, see Paola Zambelli, *White Magic, Black Magic in the European Renaissance* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007), 134. On Agrippa's scepticism, see Vittoria Perrone Compagni, “*Tutius ignorare quam scire*: Cornelius Agrippa and Scepticism,” in *Renaissance Scepticisms*, ed. Paganini and Maia Neto, 91–110.

very beginning of the 1500s. Although he did not mention Sextus in the *De rerum praenotione*, his anti-magical radicalism might have been caused by a close reading of Sextus's sceptical writings during that period.¹⁵ Thus, three main sources are central to Gianfrancesco's anti-astrological attack: the texts of Giovanni Pico and Girolamo Savonarola, mentioned by Gianfrancesco himself, and the philosophical tradition of scepticism, which he helped revive. Here the influence of Sextus Empiricus is clear but implicit; in his later works directed against magic and astrology, Gianfrancesco mentions Sextus much more openly and reuses his ideas to justify his anti-astrological positions.

At the beginning of the *De rerum praenotione*, Gianfrancesco offers a critique of all the ancient authors who had believed in prescience—which he understands to mean knowledge of the future—encompassed by the terms *praenotio*, *prognosis* as its Greek equivalent, *divinatio*, and some others.¹⁶ He tries to show that *praenotio* is composed of two words (*prae* and *notio*) and is synonymous with *cognitio*.¹⁷ Without limiting himself to *praenotio*, Gianfrancesco aims to include the highest possible number of philosophical texts in his discourse. This strategy also allows Gianfrancesco to attack a number of great ancient thinkers. The very term *praenotio* provides a reason to put forward an important distinction between the “licit” and “illicit” types of prophetic knowledge—the same distinction he applied to contrast the pagan Strix and the “living saint” Caterina Mattei. It would seem that Gianfrancesco Pico's ideas related to criticizing *praenotio*, false prophecies, and magic were supported by many thinkers of subsequent generations.

Gianfrancesco's anti-occult attacks were directed first of all against Aristotle. He explicitly rejects Aristotle's notion of *praeexistens cognitio*,¹⁸ which Cicero drew on to create the new Latin concepts of *praesumptio* and *notitia*

15. On Gianfrancesco's use of scepticism before 1520, when he started working on the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium*, see Gian Mario Cao, “*Inter alias philosophorum gentium sectas, et humani, et mites: Gianfrancesco Pico and the Sceptics*,” 127–28.

16. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.2.6–8.

17. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.1.5: “*Praenotionis nomen compositum est ex praepositione ipsa prae et notione quae idem est atque cognitio*” (The word *praenotio* consists of the preposition *prae* and *notione*, which also means cognition). All translations are mine.

18. Aristotle, “*Posterior Analytics*,” trans. Hugh Tredennick, in Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics. Topica* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), 1.1.3.

communis.¹⁹ Although addressing these concepts as well, Gianfrancesco did not, however, attack Cicero. This was presumably conditioned by Cicero's open criticism of these forms of predictions in his famous treatise *De divinatione*. Aristotle, whose writings Gianfrancesco considered the ultimate expression of pagan (that is, non-Christian) philosophy, did not do so in such an open manner.

Another important target of Gianfrancesco's attacks on the notion of *praenotio* was Plato and the Platonists. The *praenotio* in its Platonic context was developed by Boethius. The author of the *De consolazione* translated the central element of Platonic philosophy, the term *idea*, as *praenotio* or *praecognitio*. For Boethius, emanation contains *in se* foreknowledge as it descends from God. As an important notion concerning the problem of free will and the divine predestination in Augustine's terminology, this concept was adopted by scholastics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁰

Finally, *praenotio* and its variations became a central point in the philosophy of Epicurus: the original term *prolepsis*, regarded as one of the criteria for true knowledge in Epicurian philosophy, was often translated as *praenotio* and *anticipatio* in Latin interpretations. The most significant example of this terminological transformation, however, took place after the *De rerum praenotione*: namely, in the works of Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), who opposed the Aristotelian and scholastic views on the *praenotio*. It is quite symptomatic that those thinkers who elaborated on the notion in question after Gianfrancesco, including such prominent scholars as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Gassendi, adopted the same philosophical discourse regarding *praenotio*.²¹

19. Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 3 vols., ed. John B. Mayor and J. H. Swainson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.1.1. On some aspects of the reception of *praenotio* of Aristotle and Cicero in Renaissance medicine, see Gianna Pomata, "Praxis Historialis: The Uses of *Historia* in Early Modern Medicine," in *Historia. Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Gianna Pomata and Nancy G. Siraisi (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 105–46, 119.

20. Jacqueline Hamesse, "Idea chez les auteurs philosophiques des 12 et 13e siècles," in *Idea. Atti del VI Colloquio Internazionale del Lessico Intellettuale Europeo* (5–7 gennaio 1989), ed. Marta Fattori and Massimo Luigi Bianchi (Rome: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1990), 99–135.

21. On Gassendi and his interpretation of the Epicurean *prolepsis*, see Leen Spruit, *Species intelligibilis: From Perception to Knowledge. Vol. 2. Renaissance Controversies, Later Scholasticism, and the Elimination of the Intelligible Species in Modern Philosophy* (Leiden, New York, and Cologne: Brill, 1995), 413–14.

Gianfrancesco's attack on *praenotio* had the fundamental purpose of rejecting all possible sorts of pagan divination. Although Gianfrancesco did not conceal his intentions to follow Giovanni's *Disputationes*, and especially Savonarola, he also expanded on their anti-astrological and anti-magical discourse. He said that his uncle Giovanni had dedicated his twelve books to the refutation of astrology, which Gianfrancesco summarized in the fifth book and stated that he had nothing to add to it.²² However, Gianfrancesco insisted that he would broaden his project by refusing and rejecting all superstitions. Thus, he dedicated special chapters to various types of occultism, including, for example, the seventh book on magic and the sixth on physiognomy. At the same time, he opposed to these *praenotiones* the unique capacity to obtain foreknowledge—namely (in his terms) *prophetia*. According to Gianfrancesco, *prophetia* differs from *praenotio* by its very nature: as opposed to prophecy, which is conditioned by the divine intellect, the *praenotio* is considered only as a philosophical or, in Gianfrancesco's terms, an illicit phenomenon. To prove his idea, Gianfrancesco adds that philosophers, specifically Aristotle and his followers, tried to reconcile these two forms of foreknowledge and to raise the status of *praenotio*.²³ The reason why *praenotio* and its forms are so widespread is human curiosity. Gianfrancesco supposes that initially every form of divination was created in ancient Eastern societies, which had been deprived of true religion—that is, of Christianity.²⁴ In this long passage on the religious falsity of Eastern and theurgical doctrines, Gianfrancesco clearly argues against the idea of *prisca theologia*, which had become popular in Italy and Europe thanks to Marsilio Ficino (1433–99).²⁵ It is also worth noting that an almost

See also Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.109.85–86.

22. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.1.100.

23. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.3.9.

24. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.7.16–18.

25. On the *prisca theologia* concept, see Charles Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy from Agostino Steuco to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966): 505–32; Charles 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*, ed. Giovannangiola Tarugi (Florence: Olschki, 1970), 211–36; Daniel Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972); Cesare Vasoli, "Dalla pace religiosa alla 'prisca theologia'," in *Firenze e il Concilio del 1439*, ed. Paolo Viti (Florence: Olschki, 1994), 3–25; Cesare Vasoli, "*Prisca theologia* e

identical passage on the gap between true religion and divination can be found in the twelfth book of Giovanni Pico's *Disputationes*.²⁶

The *De rerum praenotione* was not the only text written by Gianfrancesco against astrology. In 1510, he completed a short piece entitled the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae*, which was not published during Gianfrancesco's life and did not circulate in manuscript form.²⁷ The only surviving copy of the *Quaestio* is in a seventeenth-century Ferrarese codex, originally kept in the Strozzi Library, and now in the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC.²⁸ The Italian scholar Walter Cavini discovered the text and published it in 1973, convincingly arguing that the *Quaestio* was an epitome for the fifth book of the *De rerum praenotione* concerning astrology. The *Quaestio* of Gianfrancesco Pico is in line with the anti-astrological discourse of his uncle. Additionally, in this 1510 text, Gianfrancesco for the first time referred to the works of Sextus Empiricus. This makes the *Quaestio* the forerunner of the *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium* and of the Renaissance sceptical tradition itself.²⁹

The *Quaestio* is dedicated to one of Gianfrancesco Pico's mentors, the humanist and physician Giovanni Mainardi (1462–1536).³⁰ The latter participated in the publication of Giovanni Pico's *Opera Omnia*, including the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. Mainardi was among the most radical opponents of astrology. It is not surprising that Gianfrancesco addressed his short anti-astrological text to Mainardi to show that the publication of the *Disputationes* was not the final step in the dispute with astrologers. According to Gianfrancesco Pico, their task was to jointly oppose all forms of occult knowledge.

scienze occulte nell'umanesimo fiorentino," in *Storia d'Italia. Annali 25: Esoterismo*, ed. Gian Mario Cazzaniga (Turin: Einaudi, 2010), 175–205; Amos Edelheit, *Ficino, Pico, and Savonarola: The Evolution of Humanist Theology: 1461/2–1498* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008).

26. Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 2.12.484–532.

27. Walter Cavini, "Un inedito di Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola. La 'Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae'," *Rinascimento* 13 (1973): 133–71.

28. Cavini, 134.

29. Cavini, 135–36.

30. Paola Zambelli, "Giovanni Mainardi e la polemica sull'astrologia," in *L'opera e il pensiero di Giovanni Pico della Mirandola nella storia dell'Umanesimo*, 2 vols. (Florence: Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento, 1965), 2:205–79; Paola Zambelli, *L'apprendista stregone. Astrologia, cabala e arte lulliana in Pico della Mirandola e seguaci* (Venice: Marsilio, 1995), 74–122.

**The controversial use of (anti-)astrological authorities in the
*De rerum praenotione***

Gianfrancesco's polemical strategy is clearly exposed in the sixth chapter of book 5, which focuses on those prominent thinkers who opposed astrology and where he finds himself in a rather complicated position. On the one hand, he seeks to reproduce his uncle's anti-astrological and historiographical arguments, maintaining as his main source the first book of the *Disputationes*, dedicated specifically to the history of astrology. On the other hand, this effort went against his criticism of the philosophical tradition dealing with astrology, especially that of Plato and Aristotle. This visible contradiction between his personal views and loyalty to his uncle's anti-astrological text explains the peculiar nature of the *De rerum praenotione*. As we will see, this approach arose from Gianfrancesco's near-plagiarism of the *Disputationes* and his extensive use of classical sources to attack astrology, on the one hand, while simultaneously attacking the use of classical texts, as such, on the other, thus causing the cognitive dissonance reflected throughout the whole of the *De rerum praenotione*.

Gianfrancesco wished to establish a strong opposition between pagan philosophy and Christian religion. Although Ficino is never explicitly named, as we will see, Gianfrancesco aims to dismantle the ideal of *prisca theologia* and *pia philosophia* that Ficino had developed in the previous century, which was based on the notion that philosophy and religion had to be in fundamental harmony for Christian piety to be restored. Gianfrancesco develops the completely opposite view: only the strict separation between philosophy and religion and an exclusive focus on Christian religion can bring faith. His use of scepticism allows him to claim that pagan philosophy cannot bring true knowledge. In this respect, Gianfrancesco reconstructs the *prisca theologia* concept in a totally different context.

At the beginning of his examination, Gianfrancesco remains generally faithful to the *Disputationes*. Citing his uncle word for word, Gianfrancesco enumerates the main opponents of astrology among the ancient philosophers. He lists Pythagoras, Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch, and Theodoret of Cyrus (fifth century CE), whose anti-astrological views were mentioned in the

Disputationes.³¹ Gianfrancesco refers to the phrase on Democritus, which described the philosopher's position on astrology, first stated in the *Disputationes*, and then in Savonarola's *Contro gli astrologi*.³² The Stoic philosopher Panaetius (second century BCE) also reappears. The only significant difference between the texts of Gianfrancesco Pico and his uncle is that the name Seneca is not mentioned in either Giovanni Pico's or Savonarola's writings.³³

The general aim of his work—to reject all forms of paganism—leads Gianfrancesco to some difficulties when considering Plato and Aristotle. According to his text (which in some ways contradicts his preceding radical statements against philosophy), Gianfrancesco admits that Plato and Aristotle did not overtly support astrology.³⁴ He suggests that should his readers thoroughly study their writings, they would discover that both philosophers did not write any texts specifically dedicated to astrology. Thus, according to Gianfrancesco Pico, Plato separated necessity from fate, while Aristotle's interest was not in fate but in exploring the natural phenomena, laws, and causes of the world. Gianfrancesco also adds that even during his travels to the East, Plato escaped the influence of astrologers and magicians, although

31. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.122: "Alii nec dignam putaverunt de qua verbum aliquando facerent silentio eam magis quam non nulli verbis condemnantes. Pythagoram Astrologiae fidem non praestasse ex Diogene Laertio et Plutarcho et Theodereto compertum est" (The others did not believe it was worth mentioning and remained silent about it, which is more revealing than if they had condemned it with words. As Diogenes Laertius, Plutarch and Theodoret demonstrate, Pythagoras had no faith in astrology). Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.46.

32. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.122: "Democriti illud vulgatum est: Quod ante pedes nemo spectat coeli scrutantur plagas" (That is ascribed to Democritus: No one sees what is before his feet: we all gaze at the stars). Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.46–48; Girolamo Savonarola, *Contro gli astrologi*, ed. Claudio Gigante (Rome: Salerno, 2000), 2.1.54.

33. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.122: "Astrologia tametsi universae magiae putetur magistra quam et irridet et confutat Panetius Stoicus et illam ipsam incessuit ex eadem porticu Seneca cuius paulo ante fecimus mentionem" (Although astrology is believed to be master of entire magic, Panaetius the Stoic mocks and refutes it; Seneca from the same Stoa, to whom we referred a little bit earlier, attacked it as well).

34. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.122: "Didicisses profecto Platonem inter adrastiam necessitatem et fatum distinxisse et unum ab alio dirimisse. Didicisses Aristotelem et eius expositores praesertim inter graecos praestantiores non aliter de fato quam de natura loqui consuesse" (Indeed, have a look at Plato who distinguished the notions of necessity and fate and separated one from the other. Have a look at Aristotle and his most outstanding commentators, especially those among the Greeks, who were accustomed to talk about nature rather than fate).

he would have had the opportunity to learn the fundamental astrological techniques there. It is impossible to determine whether or not Gianfrancesco assumed that the works of Plato and Aristotle had subsequently been made to legitimize astrology by their disciples. In any case, his attitude towards these ancient Greek philosophers is ambivalent.

Following his uncle, Gianfrancesco proceeded by proving that any philosophical school that was truly influential did not support astrology. He mentions Porphyry, who in the biography of Plotinus insisted on the critical reaction of his teacher towards any form of predictions. Gianfrancesco does not forget to refer to Firmicus Maternus (fourth century CE), who criticized Plotinus in general, and Porphyry's interpretation of Plotinus's ideas in particular.³⁵ Significantly, unlike his uncle, Gianfrancesco attributes a rejection of astrology to another famous Neoplatonic philosopher—Proclus.³⁶ At the same time, Gianfrancesco's decision to include this author in his argument seems rather strange, considering his pro-religious stance in philosophy, as Proclus took a radical position against Christians, which created difficulties for Renaissance scholars in quoting his writings or commenting on him. In any case, Gianfrancesco repeats, usually word for word, his uncle's notions on Carneades (second century BCE), Cicero, and Epicurus. With the same aim in mind, Gianfrancesco recalls Alexander of Aphrodisias (second century CE).³⁷ These names, generally taken from the *Disputationes*, allow Gianfrancesco to conclude that all major philosophical schools of antiquity opposed astrology.

Gianfrancesco also turns to other important philosophers, both eastern and western. He refers to Averroes, "the famous commentator of Aristotle and the first among the Arabs who denounced, condemned and taunted astrology,"³⁸ and censured divination in several of his treatises, sometimes using

35. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.123. Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.52–54.

36. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.123.

37. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.123–24.

38. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.124: "Averrois in Aristotelis philosophia celebr explananda et inter Arabes primus ubique Astrologiam lacerat, damnat, insectatur" (Averroes, the famous commentator of Aristotelian philosophy and the first among the Arabs, denounces, condemns and taunts astrology everywhere).

the authority of Avicenna.³⁹ The names of Origen⁴⁰ and Eudoxus of Cnidus (fourth century BCE)⁴¹ are mentioned as well. The latter, already praised in the *Disputationes* and the *Contro gli astrologi* as an expert on astronomical studies, obtains the same status of authority in Gianfrancesco's text. The *moderni* are also cited in accordance with the *Disputationes*: Nicolas Oresme (ca. 1320/25–82), “the acutest philosopher and the most skilful mathematician,” is presented side by side with Henry of Hesse (ca. 1325–97), William of Auvergne (1180/90–1249)—also known as William of Paris—and others.⁴² Gianfrancesco does not omit his uncle's contemporaries, including Paolo Toscanelli (1397–1482), Giovanni Marliani (1420–83), and even the unknown Luchinus, already mentioned in the *Disputationes*.⁴³ At the same time, he leaves out two of the most important thinkers of Giovanni Pico's milieu: Marsilio Ficino and Angelo Poliziano (1454–94). The omission of these two scholars remains unexplained but it is possible to conjecture that Gianfrancesco's attitude towards Ficino and Poliziano was determined by the “bad” influence they had on his uncle during his “heretical” period.

Turning to the main supporters of astrological speculation, Gianfrancesco adds no new names to Giovanni's list. After his uncle, he represents Claudius Ptolemy as the most influential and competent astrologer, whose legacy was

39. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.125: “In commentariis vero canticae Avicennae contrariam esse philosophiae testatur et falsa omnia astrologorum dogmata praedicat. In libris praeterea adversus Algazelis destructiones artificiosas astrologorum imagines asseverat” (In his commentaries to Avicenna's *Cantica*, he [Averroes] demonstrates that astrology contradicts philosophy and asserts that all astrological doctrines are false. In the books against Algazel, he also convincingly refutes the artificial astrological images). Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.56.

40. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.123: “Origenes Adamantius in omnibus disciplinis praececellens etiam gentium testimonio multis rationibus astrologicam vanitatem sugillavit” (As universally attested, Origen Adamantius, distinguished in all disciplines, ridiculed the vanity of astrology with numerous arguments). Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.54.

41. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.125.

42. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.125: “Nicolaus Oresinus philosophus acutissimus et peritissimus mathematicus astrologiam peculiari commentario damnavit. Guilielmus Arvernus episcopus Parisiensis, Ioannes Caton, Henricus ex Sassia et alii viri celebres eam ipsam infestarunt” (Nicolas Oresme, the acutest philosopher and the most skillful mathematician, condemned astrology in a particular commentary. William of Auvergne, bishop of Paris, John Caton, Henry of Hesse and other famous men also rejected it).

43. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.125–26.

later misunderstood and distorted by his followers.⁴⁴ He adopts the same framework as his uncle, quoting the same passage from the beginning of the *Almagest* where Ptolemy comments on Aristotle.⁴⁵ A separate passage addresses Abu Ma'shar's false identification of Ptolemy as belonging to the Egyptian royal family.⁴⁶ The level of Gianfrancesco's dependence on his uncle's text is proved by the fact that he spells the name of Manilius (first century CE) as *Mallius*, exactly the same as in the *Disputationes*.⁴⁷ Gianfrancesco also falsely attributes some astrological writings to prominent philosophers and theologians, as his uncle did. A simple enumeration of philosophical texts reveals Gianfrancesco's main source. His polemical strategy comprises both Giovanni's *Disputationes* against astrology and his own views on the subject, which, as we have already seen above, at times led to controversial positions.

In the next chapter of the *De rerum praenotione*—entirely devoted to the rejection of astrology by means of theology and law, both ecclesiastical and civil—Gianfrancesco manages to avoid such contradictions.⁴⁸ Although he

44. On this, see Ovanes Akopyan, "'Princeps aliorum' and His Followers: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola on the 'Astrological Tradition' in the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*," *Renaissance Studies* 32.4 (2018): 547–64.

45. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.127. Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.70–72.

46. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.128: "Is [Albumasar] nec philosophus nec dialecticus fuit et in mathematicis imperitus qui grammaticae artis et historiae scribendae professor ab eis ad astrologiam se convertit non minus falsa quem in historiis dicturus in quibus scripserat Ptolemaeum astrologum ex regibus fuisse Ptolemaeis Alexandro successerunt" (He [Albumasar] was neither a philosopher nor a dialectician; he was also ignorant of mathematics. He was, in fact, a professor of grammar and history, from which he converted to astrology. That is no less false than the tales he wrote about Ptolemy the astrologer who, he believed, had descended from the Ptolemaic royal family of Alexandria). Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.72.

47. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.128–29. Compare with Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.1.74: "Iam Mallium, nisi esset poeta, bone Deus, quo risu prosequemur, qui caelestes illas quas fingit imagines, paucis stellis inchoatas potius dicit quam absolutas, ne pluribus ibi ignibus accensis incendio mundus flagraret" (Oh dear God, if Mallius had not been a poet, we would have mocked him because he made certain celestial images up and claimed that a few stars only sketched, and not fully formed, them. Otherwise, the world would have lighted up, inflamed with a lot of fire).

48. With the title "Quod divina lex eiusque interpretes theologi, lex item pontifica et lex civilis astrologiam damnarint" (That divine law and theologians that interpret it, pontifical law and civil law have all condemned astrology), this chapter is one of the largest chapters in that section; see Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.6.129–39.

still follows the arguments of the *Disputationes*, he obviously feels much more comfortable engaging in the discussion through his own approach. He is more confident in working with the sources quoted throughout the passage and does not limit himself to retelling his uncle's ideas, but adds original thoughts to expand upon biblical quotations. After having demonstrated the religious grounds for opposing astrology, Gianfrancesco does not lose an opportunity to criticize those Christian writers who shrugged off what he saw as the fundamental contradictions between Christianity and astrology.

Prisca theologia as prisca haeresis

Book 7 of the *De rerum praenotione* is devoted to magic, and here Gianfrancesco Pico refers specifically to Pierre d'Ailly (1351–1420) and Roger Bacon (ca. 1219/20–ca. 1292). In this part of his anti-astrological treatise, Gianfrancesco Pico is not only drawing on his uncle's work, which devoted a substantial section to the two authors, but also on Ficino's *De religione christiana*, a work that is alluded to numerous times throughout the *De rerum praenotione*. In defining magic, Gianfrancesco Pico asserts that, for him, magic is a dangerous form of idolatry related to incantations and demons. According to him, like other occult sciences, magic first appeared in Persia, and then spread to Egypt, Babylon, and Greece.⁴⁹ Explaining the significance of magic in ancient cultures, he uses the same quote from Porphyry that his uncle used in the *Oratio de hominis dignitate* to legitimize magical speculation.⁵⁰ Gianfrancesco points out that in all ancient societies magicians possessed important status in social and cultural hierarchies: their official titles could differ, but their functions remained the same. In this passage, he implicitly refers to the *De religione christiana* of

49. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.1.187: "Magiae nomen sua moneta Latium non percussit ut magus quasi magnus dicatur sicuti Horatiano placuit intepreti non a magis particula deducitur non Graecum, non Chaldaeum, non Aegyptium sed Persicum est. Magorum nomine apud Persas auctore Porphyrio divinorum interpretes et cultores indicabantur: apud alios scriptum invenimus eos a Persis magos appellari qui elementis numen tribuerent" (The word "magic" was not coined in Latin, despite Horace's wish to interpret *magus* as *magnus*, nor did it derive from Greek, Chaldean, Egyptian. It derived from the Persian language. As Porphyry states, among the Persians, the word "magicians" was used to indicate those who interpreted and worshipped the divine. From other writings, we learn that the Persians called "magicians" those who assigned the elements to the divine).

50. Giovanni Pico, "De hominis dignitate," in Giovanni Pico, *De hominis dignitate, Heptaplus, De ente et uno e scritti vari*, 148.

Ficino. Unlike the Florentine philosopher, however, Gianfrancesco does not praise the similarities in magical doctrines within various ancient societies. On the contrary, he focuses on their common fallacies.⁵¹

In contrast to his contemporaries, who often underlined the dual nature of magic,⁵² Gianfrancesco distinguishes three forms of magic. Two forms originated in Persia; the first, created by prominent Persian magicians, remained within Persia without being disseminated outside its borders, while the second listed by Gianfrancesco dealt with incantations and necromancy. Finally, the third form, known as “natural magic,” eventually spread abroad to both the east and the west.⁵³ His understanding of “natural magic” presumes that this form

51. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.1.187: “Alii Persas eo nomine suos intelligi voluisse sapientes quemadmodum Egyptii et Hebraei sacerdotum prophetarumque nomine significabant qui divina nossent et Graeci philosophorum nomenclatura quod sapientiae vacassent, et Aethiopes Gymnosophistas et Assyrii chaldeos et Indi Brachamanas et Galli druidas” (The Persian wisemen were known under this name, similarly to the “priests” of the Egyptians and the “prophets” of the Jews, all signifying those who knew the divine; the Greeks called those who were hungry for wisdom the “philosophers,” the Ethiopians—the hymnosophists, the Assyrians—the Chaldeans, the Indians—the brahmans, the Gauls—the druids). Compare with Marsilio Ficino, “Marsilii Ficini Florentini de Christiana religione liber, ad Laurentium Medicem Patriae servatorem,” in Marsilio Ficino, *Marsilii Ficini florentini, insignis philosophi platonici, medici atque theologi clarissimi opera, in duos tomos digesta* (Basle: ex officina Henricpetrina, 1576), 1.Introduction.1: “Philosophi a Persis, quia sacris praeerant, magi, hoc est, sacerdotes, sunt appellati. Indi Brachmanas de rerum natura simul, atque animorum expiationibus consulebant. Apud Aegyptios Mathematici et Metaphysici sacerdotio fungebantur et regno. Apud Aethiopas gymnosophistae philosophiae simul magistri erant ac religionis antistites” (The Persians called the philosophers the “magicians,” that is “priests,” since they were in charge of sacred ceremonies. The Indians consulted the brahmans about the nature of things and the purification of the souls. Among the Egyptians, the mathematicians and metaphysicians administered priesthood and rulership. Among the Ethiopians, the gymnosophists were the teachers of philosophy and high priests).

52. On this, see Paola Zambelli, *L'ambigua natura della magia: filosofi, streghe, riti nel Rinascimento* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1991).

53. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.2.188: “Hinc triplex magia suborta: prima quae Persarum esset peculiaris et in Perside nata: hec auctorem habuit Ormaceum et Zoroastrem, sed non eum fortasse qui vulgo etiam doctioribus persuasus, sed alium Oromasi filium hanc postea Thraicius Zamolxis excoluit. Secunda quam incantatores, venefici, necromantes profitentur. Tertiam quam naturalem vocaverunt cuiusmodi haberetur prima illa Persarum Magia” (Hence, there appeared a threefold magic: the first one, created in Persia and peculiar to the Persians, was invented by Ohrmazd and Zoroaster, but not probably the one who was good at persuading the public as well as wisemen, but the son of Oromasius. This form of magic was later developed by Zamolxis the Thracian. The second one is being professed by enchanter, sorcerers and necromancers. The third that they called “natural magic”

of magic was later supplemented by other doctrines outside of Persia. Hence, “natural magic” received an “international” status. Gianfrancesco assumes that the Greeks were introduced to magic during their wars against the Persians, while the Romans adopted magic from the Gauls and their magicians (druids) and often sought various means of prediction. Augurs, haruspices, and dream interpreters became especially influential in Roman society.⁵⁴

Gianfrancesco’s main interest here obviously lay in countering natural magic, which had its supporters in various intellectual circles in Renaissance Italy. Gianfrancesco was undoubtedly familiar with his uncle’s contribution to this question, and the idea of natural magic being a “servant” to theology was widespread in medieval and Renaissance texts. By outlining a gradual development of magic from near eastern societies to the Greece of Plato and his disciples, Gianfrancesco reformulated the myth of *prisca theologia* in a negative light. He admits that magic took root within the European philosophical and religious discourse, although several Christian writers such as Origen, Augustine, and John Chrysostom had warned of its destructive character. Referring again to Giovanni Pico, Gianfrancesco does not criticize his uncle’s favourable views regarding natural magic, ascribing to him the important role of being a “historiographer” of magic.⁵⁵ Thus, he accurately analyzes the magical views of three prominent medieval thinkers: al-Kindi (ca. 801–73), Roger Bacon, and William of Paris. This approach echoes Giovanni’s *Oratio de hominis dignitate*,⁵⁶ but Gianfrancesco develops a completely opposite argument. In the two chapters directed specifically against al-Kindi and Roger Bacon,⁵⁷ Gianfrancesco reconsiders their status within the medieval tradition, disproving their arguments for uniting magic with philosophy and, in the case of Roger Bacon, with Christian theology.

Focusing on the origin of astrology, Gianfrancesco insists that curiosity is particular to human beings, but that it may have a negative impact on people who lack objective knowledge. These people can easily fall under the malign

was the highest among the Persians). When working through the Persian origin of magic, and especially when referring to a certain Zoroaster, son of Oromasius, Gianfrancesco clearly responds to Giovanni’s *Oratio* whose arguments he inverts in a negative way.

54. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.2.188–89.

55. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.2.189–90.

56. Giovanni Pico, *De hominis dignitate*, 150–52.

57. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.7–8.203–12.

influence of astrologers and other magicians. Thus, Gianfrancesco repeats the main arguments formulated in book 12 of the *Disputationes*, which can be regarded as the most doubtful in terms of Giovanni's authorship.⁵⁸ Gianfrancesco also reframes the geographical and cultural boundaries of the *prisca theologia*. Under the banner of pagan antiquity, which he opposes as a concept, Gianfrancesco unites several ancient doctrines widely known in Florence and the rest of Italy during the late fifteenth century, citing the Assyrians along with the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Arabs.⁵⁹ The Assyrians were considered to be very close to the Chaldeans; Ficino translated Iamblichus's *Reply to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo the Egyptian* with the title *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*. This reference to the Assyrians proves that, already in the early sixteenth century, the doctrine of *prisca theologia* was subject to modification. During the sixteenth century, historiographers typically made additions to the general list of historical states. Thus, for example, in his *De perenni philosophia*, Agostino Steuco da Gubbio (1497/98–1548) included the Armenians in the list of the *prisca theologi*.⁶⁰ Gianfrancesco, who, contrary to Steuco, did not support the doctrine of *prisca theologia*, includes the Jews in the list of ancient theologians and intends to revise the Jewish legacy, along with a critique of the Brahmins and gymnosophists.⁶¹ It is worth noting that the word "Kabbalah" does not appear in the chapter against Jewish philosophy: Gianfrancesco's attack is directed against the "Talmudists," who, in his opinion, contaminated the tradition of interpreting the Bible with magical elements.⁶² He states that instead of listening to their prophets, the Jews got embroiled

58. Ovanes Akopyan, "Me quoque adolescentem olim fallebat": Giovanni (or Gianfrancesco?) Pico della Mirandola versus *prisca theologia*," *Accademia (Revue de la Société Marsile Ficini)* 18 (2016 [2019]): 75–93.

59. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.7.16. See also Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.7.18.

60. Maria Muccillo, *Platonismo, ermetismo e 'prisca theologia'*. *Ricerche di storiografia filosofica rinascimentale* (Florence: Olschki, 1996), 17–19.

61. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 7.8.212.

62. The reference to the "Talmudists" testifies to Gianfrancesco's lack of knowledge regarding the Talmudist tradition, in which, unlike the Kabbalah, commenting on sacral texts has nothing to do with magic.

in magical speculation.⁶³ Gianfrancesco's opposition to the Jews appears to be radical. There are two possible explanations for his attitude. On the one hand, he clearly refers to the ancient tradition of Jewish mysticism, which Giovanni Pico supported in his early writings and which, according to Gianfrancesco, caused his uncle's break with the church. On the other hand, Gianfrancesco may have been suggesting that the Hebrews included some preaching practices in their mysticism. The passage in question is similar in nature to Savonarola's preaching strategies, which contrasted superstitious people to those who listened and followed true prophets. In any case, Gianfrancesco's negative attitude towards Jewish philosophy and Kabbalistic mysticism finds its firm confirmation in this passage. To these attempts to validate "true religion" with the use of philosophy, magic, and astrology, Gianfrancesco opposes two thinkers who, in his view, criticized all forms of superstition. First, he refers to Tatian the Assyrian (second century CE), who reproached the Romans for being loyal to divination. It is difficult to understand how Gianfrancesco overlooked Tatian's heretical status and focused solely on his anti-astrological views. Along with Tatian, he also mentions a Christian writer, the "blessed Saint Jerome from Florence." Under that name, he evidently meant his mentor Savonarola.⁶⁴

Gianfrancesco insists that he intended to rid true religion of pagan superstitions, divinations, and other dangerous heretical elements. Declaring that his treatise is based on Giovanni's arguments, he does not fail to point out his uncle's significant errors. It is difficult to know whether or not Gianfrancesco "forgave" his uncle for his interest in occult sciences, but he nonetheless remained faithful to Giovanni Pico's legacy, in which he considered there was no place for the magical *900 Conclusiones* and the Kabbalistic *Heptaplus*. Thus, meticulously deconstructing the *prisca theologia* as *prisca haeresis*, Gianfrancesco finds himself in an ambiguous position between Savonarola's anti-philosophical scepticism and Giovanni's anti-astrology. This ambivalence becomes even more evident in Gianfrancesco's reconstruction of the natural philosophical arguments against astrology.

63. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.7.18: "Tanta enim praenotionis cupidine humanum genus ab ipsa antiquitate estuavit ut quibus veri prophetae deerant israelitico populo peculiariter dati demonum oracula consulenda placuerit" (From those ancient times, people were so passionate in their greed for foreknowledge that they had neglected a true prophet. Instead, the people of Israel particularly enjoyed consulting the demonic oracles).

64. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 1.7.17.

Aristotle and the natural arguments against astrology

The general structure of Gianfrancesco's arguments differs from that of the *Disputationes*.⁶⁵ Unlike his uncle, Gianfrancesco does not focus on natural arguments against astrology in any specific chapter. He first presents pro-astrological natural arguments, which he then proceeds to reject. From the beginning of his examination, Gianfrancesco makes Aristotle responsible for the philosophical foundations of astrology. This makes for the most significant difference between Gianfrancesco and his uncle. While in the *Disputationes*, Giovanni Pico chooses Aristotle over Plato as his major authority in eliminating the possibility of all astral influences, his nephew's attitude towards Aristotle seems to be far more negative; Gianfrancesco considers Aristotle to be the main vehicle for the dissemination of astrological superstitions. This is because, as mentioned above, Gianfrancesco's aim is to establish a strict separation between paganism—which he considers the vehicle of either superstitions or philosophy—and Christian religion. In his opinion, no one can reach divine truth by relying solely on pagan philosophy.

Thus, Gianfrancesco states that Aristotle legitimized astrological speculation after determining the close links between its superior and inferior effects.⁶⁶ Such a dependance on celestial influences and their impact on the terrestrial world opened the door to a philosophical justification of astrology. Aristotle thus had a significant influence on the subsequent philosophical tradition, causing the dissemination of astrology, which then gained a high position among the other sciences. Gianfrancesco also accuses the subsequent philosophical tradition of the diffusion of Aristotle's ideas, but his main attack is directed against the entire body of Aristotle's works. It is also worth noting that he does not distinguish between Aristotle's original writings and those falsely attributed to him.

Gianfrancesco proceeds by enumerating the primary fields in which astrology could be applied. Agriculture, medicine, and navigation were quite common areas of application. He also adds several natural phenomena that

65. Compare the following analyses of the treatise's structure: Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 4 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 4:529–43, and Giancarlo Zanier, "Struttura e significato delle *Disputationes* pichiane," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 1.1 (1981): 54–86.

66. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.2.101.

could be predicted on the basis of astrological calculations. If Aristotle created a philosophical basis for astrological speculation, Ptolemy adapted and adopted his ideas and introduced further practical astrological techniques. In this passage, Gianfrancesco reiterates his uncle's idea that Ptolemy had intended to comment on Aristotle and had tried to reconcile his philosophy with astrology.⁶⁷ However, rather than consider Ptolemy as a misguided interpreter of Aristotle, as Giovanni had done in the *Disputationes*, Gianfrancesco states that Aristotle's philosophy was responsible for sowing the seeds of superstition in Ptolemy's system.

To reject all attempts by astrologers to justify their doctrine, Gianfrancesco borrows from his uncle's arguments and, in some cases, uses ideas from Savonarola. He decisively rejects the main astrological question of celestial causality, repeating the notion that heaven must be considered the universal cause that cannot produce particular effects. Here Gianfrancesco remains loyal to his mentors and to the long-standing anti-astrological tradition, which includes the writings of medieval scholastics. In addition, he reproduces Giovanni's central polemical strategy of highlighting the ways astrologers are not competent in their subject, because they contradict each other in their description of the main astrological techniques. Such contradictions, according to Gianfrancesco, do not allow astrologers to make accurate horoscopes or predict any sort of future event.⁶⁸

Referring to the second point, which deals with the inconsistencies within the astrological tradition, Gianfrancesco alludes to book 3 of the *Disputationes*. He distinguishes between astrological speculation and real natural events, which can be predicted through mathematical calculation. From Giovanni's text, he derives the notion that the sun and the moon produce the only significantly effective influence on the sublunary world. Any other potential impact, such as those of zodiac signs or celestial bodies and planets, is nothing but the product of speculative assumption. Gianfrancesco argues that natural events like the changes of the four seasons are not defined by astrological means, but depend exclusively on natural causes.⁶⁹

67. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.2.102.

68. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.3.103.

69. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.4.106–13.

To prove this, Gianfrancesco follows Giovanni and Savonarola, and considers the central notions of natural philosophy, such as light, motion, and heat. Using his uncle's arguments, he rejects the possible lunar influence on the tides. Borrowing from Giovanni, he mentions among the opponents of the "astrological" theory of tides a certain Adelandus, who is also referred to as the first disciple and follower of Ammonius. The identities of both Ammonius and Adelandus remain unknown. Giovanni called "Adelandus" the famous medieval astrologer and translator Adelard(us) of Bath (ca. 1080–ca. 1152). It is not unlikely that Gianfrancesco repeated his uncle's error. Trying to prove his acquaintance with the astrological tradition, Gianfrancesco argues against its other significant proponents. Thus, he criticizes Alpetragius (al-Bitruji, twelfth century CE) for his explanation of celestial motion and rejects Roger Bacon's interpretation of the influence of lunar light. However, despite all of these attempts to demonstrate his expertise in the subject, Gianfrancesco Pico clearly draws upon the information provided in his uncle's writings.⁷⁰

Gianfrancesco also claims that astrologers falsely attributed considerable power to the moon. As an example, he refers to the ancient and medieval physicians (Galen, Pierre d'Ailly, and others) who determined the critical days of illness by the position of the moon.⁷¹ Gianfrancesco therefore concludes that astrologers are unable to predict the future. Their calculations are far from being precise and the disagreements between astrologers in practical matters only reinforce his doubts.

Gianfrancesco goes on to claim that, in their work, astrologers rely on false basic concepts, which, in turn, cause discrepancies within the astrological tradition. Thus, he rejects the doctrine of animated spheres, as well as the practice of creating zodiac signs and giving them personalized characteristics.⁷² He severely opposes the attempts to correlate astrology with the four seasons or with the four types of bile. He claims that the geometrical figures of celestial bodies are not substantiated either. Gianfrancesco states that all of these astrological practices are speculative and cannot be proved with exact

70. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.4.107. Giovanni Pico referred to a certain "Adelandus Arabus" who seems to have been identified with Adelard of Bath, in the *900 Conclusiones*; see Farmer, 13–14. In the edition of the *Disputationes*, Eugenio Garin translated an original Latin form "Adelandus" by "Adelardus" in Italian; see Giovanni Pico, *Disputationes*, 1.3.308.

71. Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.4.108–09.

72. He dedicated to that problem a large chapter: Gianfrancesco Pico, *De rerum praenotione*, 5.5.113–22.

calculations and therefore should not be considered scientific. The application of this kind of false mathematical data is extremely dangerous in all three main domains related to astrology: medicine, agriculture, and travel. It is worth noting that, apart from astrologers, Gianfrancesco also places a responsibility on philosophers whose teaching gave rise to further astrological speculations. Thus, in marked contrast to his uncle, he repeatedly emphasizes the negative role of Plato, Aristotle, and their disciples in the development and dissemination of astrology.

While focusing on the theoretical and practical elements of astrology, Gianfrancesco consistently discusses these questions with clear references to the relevant chapters from the *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem*. He refers to various debates on the number of spheres, the uncertain properties of celestial bodies, and other theoretical questions that had not been solved by astrologers over the centuries in order to question the ability of astrology to formulate reliable predictions about future events. In the end, Gianfrancesco comes to the conclusion (already articulated in the *Disputationes*) that human life is not an appropriate subject for celestial influences or astrological calculations and that it is in reality conditioned only by natural phenomena. Life is not strictly determined and leaves space for individual freedom. Gianfrancesco rejects fate as a philosophical concept, denying the Platonic notion of fortune and other interpretations by ancient philosophers.

Conclusion

To summarize Gianfrancesco Pico's views on astrology, it is worth looking through the *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae*—a compendium from the *De rerum praenotione* that reproduces the main polemical strategies, as well as the primary questions, posed in his major treatise on the subject. Gianfrancesco repeats his arguments about the eastern origin of astrology and its close relation to non-Christian practices that oppose the holy scriptures and the church fathers.⁷³ His arguments against practical matters remain the same: in the application of astrological knowledge, astrologers usually contradict each other and are unable to determine the number and the motion of celestial spheres, or to attribute any specific properties and characteristics to planets, zodiac signs,

73. Cavini, 138–40.

and other celestial bodies.⁷⁴ He severely criticizes astrologers for their persistent attempts to predict important historical events using the astrological theory of “great conjunctions.”⁷⁵ His primary aim is to refute the same pro-astrological authorities—that is, ancient philosophers, Ptolemy, and eastern magicians—facing them against the traditional set of authorities, including Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

However, while considering anti-astrological texts in detail, Gianfrancesco faces the same difficulties as in his *De rerum praenotione*. His position becomes controversial when he supports the authors he had recently fought against. He repeats the structure of Giovanni Pico’s historiographic first book of the *Disputationes*, consecutively enumerating philosophers, theologians, and legislators who opposed astrology. At the same time, in his analysis of Plato and Aristotle, Gianfrancesco finds himself in a deadlock trying to reconcile Giovanni’s attitude with his own religious radicalism: all pagan philosophy is to be rejected and so is every possibility of applying astrology in some domain.

Gianfrancesco’s attitude to astrology and magic is unequivocal: he is a severe critic of every form of occult knowledge. However, the way he stands against it is not free from ambivalence. On the one hand, he insists that philosophical arguments are a good tool for the development of astrology and magic. His opposition to philosophy is conditioned by his interest in scepticism and the position of one of his mentors, Savonarola, who had thoroughly studied philosophical texts. On the other hand, a complete rejection of philosophy was in conflict with the approach of his famous and beloved relative, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. This tension provoked his rather unconvincing attempt to reconcile these two approaches, and this inconsistency went beyond particular treatises against magic and astrology and created ambivalence in Gianfrancesco’s thought. Being under the influence of two bright figures equally important to him—Savonarola and Giovanni Pico—Gianfrancesco Pico had to make a final choice either to refrain from glorifying his uncle or to counterbalance Savonarolan religious radicalism with Piconian thought. As we have seen, this ambivalence determined the peculiar nature of Gianfrancesco’s anti-astrological argument.

74. Cavini, 141: “Primo, omnis qui ignorat principia scientie alicuius propria, ipsam artem et scientiam proprie nescit” (First, everyone who ignores the proper principles of a science does not properly know this art and science); See also 143–47.

75. Cavini, 149.