

FLAVIA BUZZETTA, *MAGIA NATURALIS E SCIENTIA CABALAE IN GIOVANNI PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA*, LEO S. OLSCHKI EDITORE, FIRENZE 2019 (STUDI PICHIANI, 20), 342 PP., ISBN 9788822266309.

AMOS EDELHEIT
MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY



PICO THE MAGICIAN AND KABBALIST. IS IT REALLY THE CASE?

This book is among the latest additions to the ever-growing scholarly attention, and the publications which usually follow such attention, focused on the thought and writings of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494). More specifically, this book is a recent addition to a particular trend in the historiography on Pico which probably began in modern times with Frances Yates's 1964 volume on Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic tradition, where a chapter was dedicated to magic and Kabbalah in Pico, and reached its high point with Giulio Busi's (and his collaborators') ambitious project, *The Kabbalistic Library of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, aimed at publishing critical editions with translations of Flavius Mithridates's Latin renderings of a host of Kabbalistic texts commissioned by Pico.

Overall, these are positive and encouraging signs which might just help to change a widespread derogatory view concerning Renaissance philosophy and its place in western philosophical canon – a philosophy of which Pico, beside Machiavelli, are perhaps the best-known representatives. But one should point out one problem: the main reason for the relative popularity of these two thinkers is because they seem perfectly fit for discussions which usually have very little to do with the Renaissance and everything to do with one or another version of what is today perceived as 'modernity'. In other words: they are usually discussed outside of their historical context.

Obviously, this is not the case with Flavia Buzzetta's book which is a serious scholarly attempt to clarify and discuss the philosophical and theological significance and implications of natural magic and the science of Kabbalah in several texts of Pico, such as the *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore*, the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, the *900 Theses* (1486), the *Apology* (1487) and the *Heptaplus* (1489). It is important to point out at this stage that this book is not focused on the sources of Pico's accounts of magic and Kabbalah as such – although it naturally refers to and discusses many such sources – but on the conceptual

significance and implications of these two branches of knowledge for Pico's thought. But let us go back to this rather elusive, 'the historical context'.

Determining that which is at the centre of a historical context is by no means an easy task. Nevertheless it is an important part of scholarship which, in this regard, should keep the balance between detailed studies of particular case-studies on the one hand, and drawing some general conclusions based on the results of these detailed studies, on the other. These methodological concerns are most relevant when one has to determine to what extent, for instance, Pico's personal interest in magic and Kabbalah reflects a more general interest in these disciplines during the Renaissance, and in what sense such an interest is unique and different in comparison to previous historical contexts. In other words: do magic and Kabbalah play any significant role in the common philosophical and theological discourse (that is, the scientific discourse) of the Renaissance? The assumption underlying most, if not all, of the studies dedicated to Pico and his accounts of magic and Kabbalah is that these subjects were very important for him, but I am afraid that there is here a gap between what is assumed and what is really the case in terms of the actual historical evidence. As far as I know, very little scholarly efforts have been dedicated to other Renaissance philosophers and intellectuals, before and after the generation of Ficino and Pico, in Italy and outside Italy, and their interest in magic, Kabbalah and related disciplines. I can certainly understand the contemporary attraction to, and focus on, magic and Kabbalah, with their glamour of mystical teachings and multicultural dialogue; I most certainly admire the competence of some of the scholars in this field and their command of Latin and Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, very often working on texts which are available in manuscript form only – and yet these methodological concerns must be addressed. Virtuoso scholarship is not a substitute for proper contextualization which is still a desideratum.

All these concerns are relevant for Pico's case: to what extent did magic and Kabbalah play a significant role in his formation and development as a philosopher and influenced his thought? The present book by Flavia Buzzetta certainly aims at showing that natural magic and the science of Kabbalah are essential for understanding Pico. It also accepts the assumption that these disciplines represent a 'Renaissance topos' (e.g., p. 8, where the author refers only to magic, and mentions Ficino and Pico as the sole representatives of this topos).

The reader of this book will be faced with an overwhelming abundance of rhetoric in the introduction which does not do justice to the genuine research it aims to introduce. Here is only a flavour of it: « Secondo la mia lettura, Pico proietta la teoria della *magia naturalis* sullo sfondo della sua concezione dell'uomo come *opus indiscretae imaginis*, essere camaleontico, microcosmo dinamico che compendia tutti gli elementi del creato, creatura priva di una natura predefinita,

chiamata del suo Creatore ad autodeterminare liberamente la propria natura nell'auspicabile direzione di un'elevazione alla natura angelica e di una suprema unione mistica con Dio» (p. 9). Another problem is the emphasis on a « teorizzazione pichiana » and « sistematizzazione » (p. 10), as if Pico and Ficino, Vernia, Pomponazzi, Nifo, Vielmi and their many other contemporaries were eighteenth century philosophers and were all following only one method of doing philosophy.

The book is divided into two parts: the first (ch. 1-2) focuses on the place of natural magic in Pico's thought; the second (ch. 3-4) focuses on the place of Kabbalah; the discussion in chapter 5 somewhat combines these two themes and deals with a theory of causality in Pico in relation to practical magic and practical Kabbalah.

Clarifying the exact meaning and role of natural magic in Pico's writings stands at the centre of the first part of the book. The author tends in this part and in other places in the book to provide rather long citations, both in the body of the text and in the footnotes, of other scholars, which, on many occasions, could be summarized in a much shorter form. This aspect seems like a reminiscence of a Ph.D. dissertation which should have been cut short while preparing the book. Rhetoric still plays a role here (e.g. p. 21: « Il mago rinascimentale si presenta come un sacerdote del reale... »), but slowly it becomes balanced by means of valuable analysis of Pico's texts.

The author discusses the necessary intellectual context for a scholarly account of magic in the Renaissance before moving on to focus on Pico and his 'general theory of magic', by which she means looking for a philosophical-cultural unified project and the role of magic and Kabbalah in it (p. 41-42). The observations on p. 52, fn. 25, regarding natural magic as « *sapientia* relativa alla realtà divina », and the comparison between Pico and Pierleone da Spoleto, concerning hierarchical distinction between 'the wise' and 'the prophets', based on marginal notes in a manuscript found by the author, are a good example of the high level of scholarship found in this book. It would have been interesting to compare Pico's critique of the illegitimate magic in the *Oration* (discussed, e.g., on p. 53-54) to his critique of astrology. And indeed, the author does discuss the relation between magic and astrology later on and makes some intriguing remarks (p. 117-120). But I see no point in citing Plato in Italian (e.g., p. 56, fn. 34), or using transliteration for citations from Greek (e.g., p. 58). This reflects an inconsistent approach, since the author throughout the book provides Latin citations in the body of the text and without an Italian translation. I am aware of the fact that this is still the common approach in Italy, and yet one needs to point out that in the case of a piece of technical scholarship like the present book, Plato should be cited in Greek, and Greek letters must be used. The publisher Leo Olschki has a reputation of publishing some excellent pieces of technical

scholarship over the years; and in the light of the current threats to scholarly standards one needs to encourage this tendency and simply call for more consistency.

An important account based on Pico's *Oration* is presented on p. 62, according to which magic does not produce supernatural miracles but rather brings to light 'miracles' that are already natural; the *magus* is thus the *artifex* of such miracles, he brings into actuality that which is latent and potential in nature. While providing a relevant citation from Plotinus (again, in Italian and with transliteration of some key expressions!), and alluding to « teoria della simpatia-sinfonia universale » (p. 63), the author might consider another echo of this Stoic and Neoplatonic feature of nature found in a very standard scholastic work which contains all these 'theoretical' elements of natural magic.

Let us have a look at a piece from Giles of Rome's *Reportatio* of his commentary on the *Sentences*, 2, q. 4, found in the excerpts of Godfrey of Fontaines:

Deus enim in prima creatione rerum non solum creavit naturas rerum, sed etiam indidit eis aptitudines quibus alia ex ipsis producuntur, scilicet qualitates activas et passivas et rationes seminales, que non sunt nisi ordo materie ad formam secundum quod forma educitur ex materia.¹

The question is, of course, to what extent does Pico's 'theory' of natural magic contains any new elements.

Another important implication of natural magic which is pointed out by the author is that it is a practical knowledge that complements the contemplation through which a spiritual elevation from nature towards God takes place (p. 73). But regarding natural magic as the practical part of natural science (p. 88) means an important break from the standard Aristotelian framework, where natural philosophy belongs to 'theory' and with no sign of any practical aspect. While the author does not say anything about this, she provides a very helpful typology of different kinds of magic in Pico (p. 93–120).

Moving on to Kabbalah and its influence on Pico, it is quite clear that the author is competent in Hebrew (I have found only one mistake which is probably a typo: on p. 165, גבריל should obviously be גבריאל; I am not sure regarding the transliteration *derek* for דרך on p. 189), and familiar with the Hebrew sources and with the relevant scholarly literature.

Emphasizing that the Kabbalistic tradition is not purely one tradition (p. 125) is crucial for determining just how complicated it is to reconstruct its role and influence on Pico. The author's references to the *Liber de homine* (e.g., p. 135,

¹ GILES OF ROME, *Reportatio lecturæ super libros I-IV Sententiarum. Reportatio Monacensis. Excerpta Godefridi de Fontibus*, ed. CONCETTA LUNA, SISMELE, Firenze 2003 (Corpus philosophorum Medii Aevi. Testi e studi, 17. Aegidii Romani Opera omnia, 3: Opera theologica, 2), p. 514.

fn. 31) in Mithridates's translation (a text which is still in manuscript form), where examples of 'Christian reformulations' can be found, should have been cited and further discussed in the body of the text instead, perhaps, of some of the scholarly literature which is again extensively cited and discussed in this part as well. Scholars might like to hear more about other translators of Kabbalistic texts from Sicilian!, associated with Pierleone da Spoleto and their legacy (e.g., p. 136), instead of some of the longer accounts of modern scholars (e.g., p. 140 and 143).

The author's statement at the beginning of Chapter 4 that « Pico è il primo studioso ad offrire alla fine del Quattrocento una prima sintesi, seppure aforistica, della complessa speculazione cabbalistica » (p. 145) serves as a working assumption which is, perhaps, too dogmatic, and yet the command shown by the author in this chapter of Kabbalistic texts and their contexts is impressive. She thoroughly examines references to the Kabbalah and Kabbalistic elements and their sources (including, once again, important notes on the *Liber de homine* – e.g., on p. 152, fn. 21) in Pico's *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore* (p. 146–158), before moving on to focus of Pico's *Oration, Theses and Apology* (p. 158–195). At times the author seems to put too much pressure on the sources and tend to be too speculative, for instance: « A mio avviso è possibile che Pico utilizzi la denominazione di *scientia cabalae* con una specifica valenza concettuale, per indicare la redazione del sapere cabbalistico da parte dell'uomo, dunque il passaggio dalla rivelazione divina dei misteri cabbalistici (per cui la cabbala è una scienza rivelata, come data a priori) all'appropriazione umana di tali misteri (per cui la cabbala diviene anche una scienza scoperta ed acquisita, a posteriori) » (p. 163). This is obviously a matter of scholarly temperament rather than of scholarly standards. The comments on p. 164 regarding the relation between Kabbalah and three disciplines – theology, metaphysics and philosophy – seem to have a particular importance, just as the comments on p. 187 regarding Kabbalah as *scientia revelata* and *scientia humana*, or indeed the speculations regarding speculative and practical Kabbalah on p. 195–197.

Things become more coherent in terms of the overall themes of this book when the author discusses the relation between natural magic and practical Kabbalah (e.g., p. 209–211). Things then become more interesting when the author criticizes Wirszubski and others for rejecting the possibility that Pico was influenced by Hebrew texts on magic (echoing, in turn, ancient and medieval Greek, Latin and Arabic texts on magic), which were related by him to practical Kabbalah (e.g., p. 227–240). Once again we see how the practical part of Kabbalah is the catalyst for the actualization of more theoretical disciplines: « Nella visione pichiana, la *pars practica scientiae cabalae* rappresenta il versante operativo-applicativo della cabala e costituisce la disciplina capace di tradurre in atto le potenzialità intrinseche ai diversi domini del reale di competenza della

metaphysica formalis e della theologia inferior » (p. 243). In this regard, practical Kabbalah can be considered as Kabbalistic magic, claims the author (p. 247).

The last chapter discusses the implications of all the previous analyses, now defined by the author as « *simpatia universale* », on what the author calls « *la teoria della causalità* » (p. 249). This is an attempt to present a coherent cosmological picture based mainly on Pico's *Commento sopra una canzone d'amore*, the *Oration*, the *Theses* and the *Apology*. The problem, as far as I am concerned, is in the anachronistic use of the term 'theory' here and throughout the book. Looking for an 'ontological model' in Pico's *Theses* (p. 259) is far beyond the historical evidence that we have. The suggestion regarding a first universal cause and a second intermediate cause (p. 270) is interesting, but the whole discussion is very speculative. Luckily, this book contains enough sections of well-documented and well-contextualized analyses which do balance the speculative, and at times anachronistic efforts to find a 'general and coherent theory' of magic and Kabbalah (p. 283) in Pico's texts.