

Extract on Pico and Renaissance magic from S.A. [Steve] Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional Religious and Philosophical Systems* (Tempe, Ariz.: MRTS, 1998). See <http://www.safarmer.com/pico>.

DECIPHERING THE 900 THESES

iv. Pico and the Syncretic Origins of Renaissance Magic: Further Problems in the Yates Thesis

I will end my sketch of Pico's theses by looking at his magical system, which was closely tied to his mystical and eschatological thought. Pico's papal troubles and the complexities of the theses discouraged from the start any general discussion of the goals of his debate. But the esoteric side of his work was studied intensely for nearly two hundred years after his death, with scores of writers from Johann Reuchlin and Agrippa von Nettesheim to John Dee, Giovanni Della Porta, Francesco Patrizi, Robert Fludd, and Athanasius Kircher plagiarizing mercilessly from Pico's magical and Cabalistic theses or from his discussions of natural magic and Cabala in the *Oration and Apology*.³⁹

The fullest interpretation of Pico's magic to date is found in a key chapter of Frances Yates's classic study, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (1964). Part of this side of Yates's work was deeply indebted to the analysis of Renaissance magic of her longtime colleague at the Warburg Institute in London, D. P. Walker, who was in turn heavily influenced by an earlier Warburg study by Panofsky and Saxl.⁴⁰ Yates's interpretation of Pico's magic depended heavily on the traditional view of Pico as Ficino's "disciple." In Yates's formulation, Pico first adopted Ficino's "natural magic" and then added to this his own "Cabalistic magic," which completed the foundations of all later Renaissance magical traditions.⁴¹ While other sides of Yates's reading of Renaissance magic have been heavily criticized by other scholars (especially the role she assigned in it to so-called Hermetism), her views of Pico's magic and its links to Ficino's work have

³⁹ The many surviving manuscripts that contain extracts from Pico's magical and Cabalistic theses illustrate the special interest that Renaissance intellectuals took in this side of his thought. On some of these manuscripts, see Kristeller (1965: 107–23). The fact that Renaissance *magi* borrowed extensively from Pico without attribution has ironically caused some scholars to underestimate Pico's influence on Renaissance magic. Thus in his long chapter on Renaissance natural magic, which does not mention Pico, Shumaker (1972: 111–12, 137–38) summarizes a key passage from Giovanni Della Porta's *Magia naturalis* and another from Agrippa von Nettesheim's *De occulta philosophia* without recognizing that both were plagiarized nearly verbatim from Pico.

⁴⁰ Walker (1975), Panofsky and Saxl (1923). The latter study was written while the Warburg was still located in Germany.

⁴¹ Yates (1964: 84ff.). Brian Copenhaver's study (1997) of magic in Pico's Cabalistic theses, which arrived while I corrected proofs of this book, is referred to briefly in my commentary on Pico's text.

been repeatedly cited as hard historical fact.⁴² Due to the extraordinary influence of this side of Yates's model, it will be necessary to approach Pico's magic in part through a criticism of her study.⁴³ Pico's syncretic system drew on an enormous range of Western magical traditions, making it difficult to provide any comprehensive view of this side of his thought except through a thesis-by-thesis discussion, some of which is provided in my commentary. My primary object in this section is to clear the way for a fresh reading of the theses by correcting misconceptions about Renaissance magic rooted far too deeply to be ignored. One of my subsidiary aims will be to provide evidence that we will need in chapter 4, which discusses Pico's apparent *repudiation* of magic in his posthumously published *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*. At the end of this section, I will discuss the role that magic played in the eschatological goals of Pico's debate.

Yates's model of the origins of early Renaissance magic

Following earlier Warburg scholars, Yates associated Renaissance *magia naturalis* rather narrowly⁴⁴ with the particular brand (or brands) of astrological magic found in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda* (On Obtaining Life Celestially)—the last of the three treatises in Ficino's medical compilation *De vita*.⁴⁵

⁴² Yates's view of Pico's magic is accepted without question in frequently cited studies of Renaissance occultism like Keith Thomas's (1971) and in numerous textbook accounts of Renaissance thought. The most thorough criticism of Yates's views of Renaissance magic is found in Westman and McGuire (1977); see also Copenhaver (1987, 1988), Vickers, ed. (1984). Trinkaus (1970), the only writer to seriously challenge Yates's view of Pico's magic, does so on historiographical grounds (pitting "humanism" against "Hermetism") and without analysis of the nine hundred theses.

⁴³ Every student of Renaissance thought is deeply indebted to Yates's studies, and it is unfortunate that it is necessary to criticize her views in the following pages. The fact that after more than three decades any serious analysis of Pico's magic must still begin with a discussion of Yates's views is a tribute to the importance of her work.

⁴⁴ On other sides of Renaissance magic, including its metaphysical foundations, see above, pp. 83–85.

⁴⁵ Below, I used the 1498 Venetian edition, reprinted in 1978 with a listing of variant readings from later editions and notes and a bibliographical essay by the late Martin Plessner. Plessner underlined a number of peculiarities in Yates's reading of the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, including some serious mistranslations. On the *De vita*, see now the critical edition and translation by Kaske and Clark (1989). Kaske and Clark accept the traditional view that Pico was Ficino's "disciple" (p. 57) and hence do not discuss the conceptual ties

Yates traced the origins of the revival of magic she pictured in the Renaissance to Ficino's translation in 1463 of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, whose religious associations "rehabilitated" medieval magic, turning "that old dirty magic" into the "learned" and "religious" magic of the later *De vita coelitus comparanda*.⁴⁶ As Ficino's disciple, Pico "imbibed from Ficino his enthusiasm for *magia naturalis* which he accepted and recommended much more forcibly and openly than did Ficino," adding to this his own "Cabalistic magic," which tapped forces "beyond the natural powers of the universe," invoking "angels, archangels, the ten sephiroth which are names or powers of God, God himself, by means some of which are similar to other magical procedures, but more particularly through the power of the sacred Hebrew language." By fusing Ficino's natural magic with his own Cabalistic magic, in Yates's eyes, Pico completed the basic arsenal of the Renaissance magician. Pico's *Oration*—his preface to his Roman debate—was, in fact, "the great charter of Renaissance Magic, of the new type of magic introduced by Ficino and completed by Pico."⁴⁷

Yates attempted to tie Pico's magic to the growth of modern technological attitudes. Behind this side of her thesis lay another version of the romantic theme that "Renaissance man" developed a powerful "philosophy of will":

It was now dignified and important for man to operate; it was also religious and not contrary to the will of God that man, the great miracle, should exert his powers. It was this basic psychological reorientation towards a direction of the will which was neither Greek nor mediaeval in spirit, which made all the difference.⁴⁸

According to Yates, Pico thus brought mankind to a critical turning point in history:

between Pico's earlier magical writings and Ficino's later ones. In the same place, they also endorse the view that following his troubles with the church "Pico soon renounced magic and such astrology as he had ever believed in." We will look at the remarkable origins of this traditional view in the final chapter of this study.

⁴⁶ Yates (1964: chaps. 1–5, especially pp. 17–19, 41, 80, 107). Yates does not attempt to explain the twenty-six year interval between Ficino's translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the appearance of his only magical work, the *De vita coelitus comparanda*.

⁴⁷ Yates (1964: 84–86).

⁴⁸ Yates (1964: 156). On the "will" theme in Renaissance historiography, see above, pp. 105ff.

CHAPTER THREE

The profound significance of Pico della Mirandola in the history of humanity can hardly be overestimated. He it was who first boldly formulated a new position for European man, man as Magus using both Magia and Cabala to act upon the world, to control his destiny by science. And in Pico, the organic link with religion of the Magus can be studied at its source.⁴⁹

Problems in Yates's view of Pico's magic

Analyzing Yates's claims more closely will help us define the precise nature of Pico's magic, preparing us for a fresh look at his magical texts. I will limit myself to discussing five problems in Yates's thesis:

1. *Pico wrote his magical works before Ficino wrote his.* The first problem involves an unfortunate chronological oversight. The fact that no one has made much of it in the thirty years of debates over Yates's work underscores the power of the traditional view that Pico was Ficino's disciple: The *De vita coelitus comparanda*—Ficino's only magical treatise, and our sole source of information concerning his *magia naturalis*—was not written until some two-and-a-half years after Pico introduced his own magical thought in the nine hundred theses, *Oration*, and *Apology*.⁵⁰ One might argue that Pico learned his *magia naturalis* from Ficino through their personal contacts in Florence. But in the period in which Pico composed his three magical texts, in the fall and winter of 1486–1487, he was not near Florence, nor had he spent more than a month there at the most since mid-1485.⁵¹ Ficino and Pico did keep in touch part of this time through letters and intermediaries. But relations between them in this period were at their lowest point ever, as we find from their letters and from the criticism that Pico aimed at Ficino in

⁴⁹ Yates (1964: 116).

⁵⁰ Part of book 1 of *De vita*, which contains no magic, was apparently written as early as 1480, but the rest including the *De vita coelitus comparanda* was not composed before the summer of 1489. See Kristeller (1937: 1:lxviii ff.), Kaske and Clark (1989).

⁵¹ Pico left Florence for the University of Paris in the summer of 1485, returning to Italy in late March or early April 1486. After a brief stop in Florence, he was in Arezzo by 10 May 1486, where he became involved in a famous scandal—the so-called rape of Margherita—that ended with the death of a number of Pico's retainers, with Pico's brief imprisonment in Arezzo, and with his temporary retirement to Perugia and nearby Fratta, where he composed the *Commento*, the *Oration*, and nine hundred theses. Pico had no face-to-face contact again with Ficino until 1488.

the *Commento*, *Oration*, and nine hundred theses, which were all written in the fall and winter of 1486–1487.⁵²

If Pico did learn his natural magic from Ficino, then, he must have done so at a minimum some four years before Ficino wrote his only magical work. Assuming that Ficino's views on magic were the same in 1485 as in 1489—a doubtful assumption, given his well-known vacillations on the subject⁵³—from what we know of relations between the two writers, the *last* thing we would expect in 1486 would be to find Pico endorsing those views. Support for this interpretation shows up in the nine hundred theses, where Pico brags of the magic that he “first discovered” in the *Orphic Hymns*—another apparent slap at Ficino, who had composed an earlier, nonmagical, commentary on the *Hymns* of which Pico certainly had knowledge.⁵⁴ Further evidence on this point shows up in the *Heptaplus*, where Pico rejects magic using astrological talismans, whose use Ficino endorsed a few months later in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*.⁵⁵ Ficino in fact alludes to the *Heptaplus* in that text, and hence was aware of Pico's attack, which came in a

⁵² For some of this criticism, see above, pp. 12–13 and *passim*. Their relationship was clearly already sour, however, since earlier in 1486 Ficino wrote a satirical apology for Pico's tragic misadventures in Arezzo (see previous note) that Pico could not have found remotely amusing. For this text, see Kristeller (1937: 1:56–57).

⁵³ On disagreements over Ficino's views of astrology and celestial magic in different periods, see Michael Allen (1984: 183 n. 27). Walker, whose opinions Allen endorses, tells us flatly (1975: 53) that the *De vita coelitus comparanda* “is the only work where [Ficino] recommends magic that he evidently practiced himself.”

⁵⁴ On Ficino's commentary, see my introductory note to theses 10>1–31. Pico's boast is made in his title to that section of the text.

⁵⁵ *Heptaplus* 2.7, in *Opera*, 22; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 244. Pico writes: “Quare neque stellarum imagines in metallis, sed illius, id est, Verbi Dei, imaginem in nostris animis reformemus. Neque a caelis aut corpore aut fortuna, quae nec dabunt, sed a Domino caeli, Domino bonorum omnium, cui data omnis potestas in caelo et in terra, et praesentia bona quatenus bona sunt, et veram aeternae vitae felicitatem quaeramus” [Therefore let us not form images of stars in metals, but images of him, that is, the Word of God, in our souls. Let us not seek from the heavens goods of the body or fortune, which they will not give; but from the Lord of heaven, the Lord of all goods, to whom is given every power in heaven and on earth, let us seek both present goods—insofar as they are good—and the true happiness of eternal life]. It should be noted that the views that Pico endorses here, which were written while he was trying to repair his relations with the church, are in no way incompatible with the magic discussed in the nine hundred theses, which (Yates's claims aside) did not involve astrological talismans. On the latter point, see my commentary to theses 9>24–25.

CHAPTER THREE

period in which the two philosophers *were* in regular contact.⁵⁶ If Pico and Ficino triggered a magical revival in this period—a claim that we will look at shortly—then it must have been Pico and not Ficino who started it. Pico himself, in fact, pointedly suggests something like this more than once in the nine hundred theses and *Apology*.⁵⁷

2. Pico did not view Mercury (*Hermes*) *Trismegistus* as a magician. Another problem in Yates's model (one by now widely recognized) involved what she pictured as the Hermetic sources of that revival. We can leave aside the question here, which has been discussed by other scholars, of how far Ficino's own magic was Hermetic, except to note the large number of non-Hermetic magical sources cited in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* (Galen, al-Kindi, Albumasar, Thabit, Haly, Avicenna, Albert the Great, Arnald of Villanova, Peter of Abano, etc.) or to recall that Ficino claimed that his work was part of his commentary-in-progress on Plotinus—a work that Ficino tells us was begun at Pico's urging.

Attempts to identify Pico's *magia naturalis* with Hermetism—a tradition that Pico closely associated with Ficino—rest on even less solid grounds. In the *Oration* and *Apology* Pico provides us with a long list of magicians who might be reasonably viewed as the sources of this side of his thought. In this class “among the moderns” Pico singles out three writers who had “scented out” *magia naturalis*—al-Kindi in the ninth century and William of Paris (William of Auvergne) and Roger Bacon in the thirteenth.⁵⁸ The *Apology* also mentions one of Pico's contemporaries—not Ficino, but a mutual friend, Antonius Chronicus (Antonio Vin-

⁵⁶ At the end of June 1489, we find them together at the scholastic debate at Lorenzo de' Medici's house discussed above, p. 6 n. 16. By September of that year, Ficino, like Pico two-and-a-half years earlier, was writing his own ecclesiastical *Apology* for his magic—printed at the end of the *De vita*—which concludes in part with a mock plea for help from his “Phoebus” Pico, who he knew could slay this “poisonous Python” (Ficino's ecclesiastical opponents) rising from the swamp “with a single shot” (p. 186). Given Pico's ongoing troubles with the church—Innocent VIII made it clear in that year that he viewed the *Heptaplus* as no less heretical than the nine hundred theses—it is impossible to miss the irony in Ficino's words.

⁵⁷ Thus in the *Apology* (*Opera*, 180–81), Pico boasts that he was “first among the Latins” to mention Cabala, which he linked with magic, and in the nine hundred theses claimed that he was the first to discover magic in the *Orphic Hymns*.

⁵⁸ *Opera*, 328, 121; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 152.

ciguerra)—as someone who had mastered natural magic in Pico's own day.⁵⁹ The *Apology* elsewhere associates magic with still another "modern," Albert the Great.⁶⁰ Pico further lists as ancient magicians—drawing this time from Pliny, Apuleius, Porphyry, and similar late-ancient sources—Homer, Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Plato, Zalmosis, Zoroaster, Eudoxus, Hermippus, Apollonius of Tyana, Plotinus, and several minor Pythagoreans.⁶¹ He also makes much in the nine hundred theses, *Oration*, and *Apology* of his "discovery" of magic in the *Orphic Hymns* and *Cabala*.⁶²

What is remarkable in these lists is that virtually the only prominent *priscus theologus* who is not listed as a magician is Hermes Trismegistus!⁶³ The one clear reference to Hermetic magic in Pico's early works—a negative one—shows up in the *Apology*, where Pico repeats a complaint from William of Auvergne's *De universo* concerning the Egyptians' use of illegal magic invoking demons. Going to Pico's source, we find that William's target was a famous passage on enticing demons into idols found in the Hermetic *Asclepius*—a text that Yates viewed as a central catalyst in the Renaissance magical revival.⁶⁴ Significantly, none of the ten conclusions that Pico attributes in his theses to Mercury Trismegistus contains any of the astrological magic that Ficino associated with that figure.⁶⁵ Finally, in Pico's posthumously published *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*, magical works attributed "by some" to Hermes are treated with scorn.⁶⁶

Given the wide range of magical texts already available in the Middle Ages—including the long list of Greek, Arabic, and Latin authors provided by Pico and the ancient and medieval medical, astrological, and philosophical sources cited by Ficino—it is not clear in what way a magical revival was needed in the Renais-

⁵⁹ *Opera*, 121. Like several other personal references, this one is suspiciously dropped from the parallel section of the *Oration* published by Pico's nephew after his uncle's death. Cf. *Opera*, 328; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 152.

⁶⁰ *Opera*, 169.

⁶¹ *Apology/Oration*, in *Opera*, 120–21, 327–28; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 150.

⁶² On *Cabala* and magic, cf. *Apology* (*Opera*, 166–80, 239) and the evidence discussed in my commentary on the theses.

⁶³ This is the most amusing evidence that we have of the Pico-Ficino rift: Pico was not prepared to acknowledge Hermes Trismegistus, whom Pico closely linked with Ficino, as a real magician.

⁶⁴ *Opera*, 169; Yates (1964: 41).

⁶⁵ Cf. theses 27.1–10.

⁶⁶ Below, p. 145. As we shall see later, however, Savonarolan adulterations in the *Disputations* may have factored in passages like these.

CHAPTER THREE

sance. If as evidence for such a revival we point to the expanded magical syntheses of the later Renaissance that included Cabala, then again it was Pico and not Ficino who must be credited with having started it.⁶⁷ Obviously, fresh Renaissance translations of Greek magical and theurgic treatises already indirectly underlying medieval magic, the most important translated by Ficino after Pico's proposed debate,⁶⁸ added fuel to the enthusiasm for the occult in the later Renaissance. This was especially true as the printing press made wide distribution of these sources and their broader syntheses in magical handbooks like Agrippa von Nettesheim's possible for the first time.⁶⁹ But this phenomenon was not dependent on the recovery of any privileged set of Hermetic (or non-Hermetic) texts. This interpretation is confirmed by the enormous popularity in the later Renaissance of the same medieval Arabic and Latin magical treatises that lay at the foundations of much of Pico's and Ficino's magical systems—works attributed to al-Kindi, William of Paris, Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, and so on—which apart from the absence in them of Cabala are virtually indistinguishable from Renaissance magical texts. A number of these medieval treatises were, in fact, first printed in the sixteenth century and gained unprecedented circulation in an appendix to Agrippa von Nettesheim's popular magical handbook.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ficino, who knew no Hebrew, defers to Pico on matters related to Jewish thought in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, chap. 22 (repr. 1978: 168). Indeed, echoes of Pico's concept of the mystical Sabbath, which had Talmudic and kabbalistic roots, show up in the previous chapter of Ficino's text (p. 160).

⁶⁸ These included selections of relevant materials from late-Greek Neo-Platonic texts already drawn on by Pico in the nine hundred theses, *Apology*, and *Oration*—including Porphyry's *De abstinentia*, Iamblichus's *De mysteriis* and *Vita Pythagorae*, and a fragment from Proclus that Ficino entitled *De sacrificiis et magia*. All these translations were apparently completed in 1489—the same year as the *De vita coelitus comparanda* and two-and-a-half years after publication of the nine hundred theses. Cf. here Kristeller (1937: 1:cxxxii ff.) and the somewhat different chronology given by Marcel (1958). For the role of these works as sources of Ficino's magic, see Walker (1975: 36ff.); cf. also Copenhaver (1987).

⁶⁹ On Agrippa and Renaissance magic, see above, pp. 84–85.

⁷⁰ Vol. 1 of Agrippa's *Opera* (repr. 1970), which contains the *De occulta philosophia*, is bound with a dozen or so other medieval and Renaissance magical tracts including a commentary on book 30 of Pliny's *Historia naturalis* which (like so many other Renaissance magical texts) plagiarizes heavily from Pico's *Oration* or *Apology*. The work also includes other magical treatises attributed to medieval and Renaissance figures including Gerhard of Cremona, Peter of Abano, and Abbot Trithemius.

3. *The mechanisms of Pico's natural magic differed from Ficino's.* Another part of Yates's model involves the mechanisms that she associated with natural magic—above all, given the stress she put on Ficino's text, mechanisms of a celestial sort. Following Walker, Yates pointed to the *spiritus mundi* or "world spirit" as the medium by which celestial powers flowed into the terrestrial realm. Part of Western magic was indeed "spiritual magic" of this sort (to adopt here Walker's terms),⁷¹ especially the medical-magical traditions adopted in Ficino's medical compilation, in which the *spiritus mundi* provided a handy link between the celestial world and the quasi-physical spirits binding body and soul in Greek, Arabic, and Latin medicine. But the *spiritus mundi* was only one of a large number of mechanisms used to explain these interactions.⁷² Numerous ancient, medieval, and Renaissance magical tracts refer vaguely to stellar rays (*radii*) or influences (*influxus*) without mentioning the *spiritus mundi* at all. Others ignore the problem of transmission completely, considering the mere existence of cosmic correspondences as a sufficient explanation for the magical powers found in the world. In other texts, interactions between the celestial and terrestrial worlds are depicted in a quasi-mechanical fashion, with direct contact between the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic spheres, ending in the derived motion of the lunar orb, "churning" the four sublunary elements and hence transmitting celestial effects into the material world. Still other works, tied less directly to astrological models, invoke the Neo-Platonic "vehicle" (or "body of the soul") as a magical bond between man and the Platonic "world soul" (*anima mundi*), which penetrated the whole of the created realm.⁷³ Other treatises, which are strikingly similar in a wide range of Eurasian cultures, develop

⁷¹ Those terms are a bit misleading, since in Renaissance magical texts the words "spiritual magic" or "spiritual science" generally referred to magic involving angels and demons and not to magic transmitted through the *spiritus mundi*. On this in Pico, e.g., see the *Apology*, in *Opera*, 172.

⁷² The *spiritus mundi* and closely related concepts (the Chinese *ch'i*, Indian *prana*, Christian *spiritus sanctus*, etc.) all originated in primitive concepts of divine breath inherited from preliterate animistic traditions. In their abstract manifestations in literate times, these concepts became useful devices to rationalize the transmission of magical forces in the cosmos; invocation of such devices was neither necessary nor universal, however; as artifacts of more fundamental correlative processes in the brain (see pp. 92–96 above), interactions in imitative magic could be pictured as being transmitted through any number of cosmic media—or through no medium at all.

⁷³ On the Neo-Platonic "vehicle," which Pico syncretically links with still another magical mechanism (the "sense of nature" of Latin scholastics), see thesis and note 5>45.

CHAPTER THREE

elaborate theories of musical-magical resonances that link heaven and the earth.⁷⁴

This list of mechanisms could be greatly expanded. In a typical syncretic fashion, Renaissance magical treatises commonly collected conflicting or partially conflicting accounts of magical transmission from older sources and combined them with varying degrees of systematic consistency. Much evidence shows that Pico's nine hundred theses and Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, despite their many other differences, both fall squarely in this category.⁷⁵

Given its extreme syncretic nature, the text of the nine hundred theses predictably invokes a large number of magical mechanisms: the Neo-Platonic "vehicle" or body of the soul, cosmic or stellar "influxes," and many others. Curiously, however, one mechanism that does *not* show up in Pico's text is the *spiritus mundi*, which according to Walker and Yates lay at the center of Ficino's *magia naturalis*.⁷⁶ Indeed, the only reference in the whole of the nine hundred theses to "spirits" (other than demonic or theological ones) comes in the following two "mathematical conclusions":

7>7. Just as medicine chiefly moves the spirits that rule the body, so music moves the spirits that serve the soul.

7>8. Medicine heals the soul through the body, but music the body through the soul.

⁷⁴ For some interesting comparative evidence, see DeWoskin's study (1984) of resonance theory in Chinese magic, where we find the cosmic *ch'i* and musical forces playing roles similar to those assumed by the *spiritus mundi* and similar concepts in Western musical magic.

⁷⁵ Thus in the *De vita coelitus comparanda* we find celestial "influxes" or "rays" sometimes linked with the *spiritus mundi*, sometimes with the Aristotelian "quintessence," and sometimes with the Platonic *anima mundi*. Cf., e.g., chaps. 1–4, 16. Walker (1975: 13 n. 1) concedes that Ficino was "somewhat inconsistent" on the nature of the *spiritus mundi* but nonetheless, like Yates after him, treats Ficino's doctrine of celestial influences as a product of systematic rather than syncretic processes. This is also apparently Copenhaver's view (1988). Once we recognize that the text is a compilation, as Ficino himself tells us, the inconsistencies in the work become totally understandable.

⁷⁶ It is doubtful that this omission throws light on the Pico-Ficino rivalry: The *spiritus mundi*, as we have seen, was only one of many alternate magical mechanisms, and nothing suggests that in 1486 Pico associated it specifically with Ficino. Given the central role that historians have assigned to the *spiritus mundi* in Renaissance magic, however, it is noteworthy that the concept played no role in the three earliest magical texts—Pico's nine hundred theses, *Oration*, and *Apology*—that we have from any major Renaissance figure.

DECIPHERING THE 900 THESES

These theses are themselves noteworthy, since they demonstrate that Pico believed that music—which he associated with one at least one kind of magic⁷⁷—operated on the soul through its quasi-physical “spirits,” another idea that has been claimed as original to Ficino’s later magical work.⁷⁸ This minor point aside, however, these theses do not suggest that the *spiritus mundi* played any role in Pico’s magical thought. In his posthumously published *Disputations against Divinatory Astrology*, it is true, Pico does speak of a “celestial spirit” (*caelestis spiritus*)—if not a *spiritus mundi*—that transmits forces of some sort into the lower world. Yates, citing Walker, claims that the *Disputations* repeats “what is practically Ficino’s theory of astral influences borne on a ‘celestial spirit,’” and based on that claim proposes a sweeping reinterpretation of the *Disputations*—which explicitly, at least, attacks magic—as a hidden defense of “Ficinian ‘astral magic’” and “a vindication of *Magia naturalis*.”⁷⁹ Walker himself, however, whom Yates miscites on this point, noted a critical distinction between Pico’s *caelestis spiritus* and Ficino’s *spiritus mundi*—a distinction that in Walker’s eyes, at least, rendered Pico’s version of that concept useless in magic. Due to the infirmity of the lower world, Pico’s “celestial spirit” could affect sublunary objects in only a general way; all individual properties arose from unpredictable material differences in nature. Walker writes:

One could not, therefore, on [Pico’s] view, say that any particular herb, sound or food was more solarian or venereal than any other, nor use [Pico’s *caelestis spiritus*] to transform one’s own spirit, as Ficino proposed; nor could one consider oneself as specially subject to the influence of any one planet.⁸⁰

My object here is not to claim that Pico repudiated all forms of celestial magic—we will later see that he did not—but to provide further evidence that his concept of *magia naturalis* was significantly different from the *magia naturalis* discussed in Ficino’s later work.

⁷⁷ See, e.g., Pico’s theses on the *Orphic Hymns* (10>1–31).

⁷⁸ Walker (1975: 24ff.).

⁷⁹ Yates (1964: 114–15). On the *Disputations* and magic, see below, pp. 142–45. Pico’s apparent repudiation of magic in that text could have arisen from several causes that we will examine later, including Savonarolan tampering with Pico’s text.

⁸⁰ Walker (1975: 25ff.). Walker rather overstates the case, however, at least in respect to Pico’s early thought, as suggested in theses 5>9–12. Important ambiguities in Pico’s discussions of astrological correspondences are analyzed in chap. 4, below.

CHAPTER THREE

4. *Yates misread Pico's views of magic and Cabala.* Yates oversimplified other important parts of Pico's magical thought, including his views of "practical Cabala," or what Yates labeled "Cabalistic magic" (a phrase not used by Pico himself). Starting from the assumption that Pico's *magia naturalis* was celestial magic like Ficino's, Yates argued that his practical Cabala "attempted to tap the higher spiritual powers, beyond the natural powers of the universe," invoking for magical ends angels, archangels, and the powers of "God himself."⁸¹

Pico did distinguish the powers of Cabala from those of natural magic, but that distinction did not involve a simple identification of *magia naturalis* with astrological powers or Cabala with higher ones. Instead, as we would expect from his syncretic system, Pico acknowledged many different *types* of natural magic and Cabala that possessed complex and overlapping roles. Thus while Pico hints that one kind of Cabala invoked intellectual or angelic powers,⁸² as Yates tells us, he also discusses at length another part "that concerns the powers of celestial bodies." He also tells us that one side of his *magia naturalis* involved "the powers and activities of natural agents"—that is, sublunary forces—suggesting again that his natural magic did not deal solely with the celestial or astral realm.⁸³ Moreover, Pico went to extraordinary lengths—for obvious reasons, given the location of his planned debate at the Vatican—to deny that the *magus* had direct access to God's power, except in the general sense that God was the ultimate source of all magic.⁸⁴

Pico addressed these issues in his defense of the following thesis—in Renaissance times, the most notorious in the text—that was judged to be "false, erroneous, superstitious, and heretical" by Innocent VIII's papal commission:

9>9. There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala.

Yates tells us that "what exactly he meant by this amazing statement is nowhere fully explained," although she speculates that the thesis might be tied to a concept "of the Eucharist as a kind of *Magia*."⁸⁵ In fact, however, Pico explained his views on this issue in detail in the *Apology*, on two pages that Yates cites four

⁸¹ Yates (1964: 84). On magic in the Cabala, see also the notes on Wirszubski (1989) and Copenhaver (1997) in my commentary.

⁸² Cf. theses 9>16–18, 11>12 and notes; *Apology*, in *Opera*, 172.

⁸³ *Apology*, in *Opera*, 172.

⁸⁴ Cf. thesis 9>6.

⁸⁵ Yates (1964: 105–6). If Yates were right, this would have been a particularly hard sell for Pico at Rome.

CHAPTER THREE

4. *Yates misread Pico's views of magic and Cabala.* Yates oversimplified other important parts of Pico's magical thought, including his views of "practical Cabala," or what Yates labeled "Cabalistic magic" (a phrase not used by Pico himself). Starting from the assumption that Pico's *magia naturalis* was celestial magic like Ficino's, Yates argued that his practical Cabala "attempted to tap the higher spiritual powers, beyond the natural powers of the universe," invoking for magical ends angels, archangels, and the powers of "God himself."⁸¹

Pico did distinguish the powers of Cabala from those of natural magic, but that distinction did not involve a simple identification of *magia naturalis* with astrological powers or Cabala with higher ones. Instead, as we would expect from his syncretic system, Pico acknowledged many different *types* of natural magic and Cabala that possessed complex and overlapping roles. Thus while Pico hints that one kind of Cabala invoked intellectual or angelic powers,⁸² as Yates tells us, he also discusses at length another part "that concerns the powers of celestial bodies." He also tells us that one side of his *magia naturalis* involved "the powers and activities of natural agents"—that is, sublunary forces—suggesting again that his natural magic did not deal solely with the celestial or astral realm.⁸³ Moreover, Pico went to extraordinary lengths—for obvious reasons, given the location of his planned debate at the Vatican—to deny that the *magus* had direct access to God's power, except in the general sense that God was the ultimate source of all magic.⁸⁴

Pico addressed these issues in his defense of the following thesis—in Renaissance times, the most notorious in the text—that was judged to be "false, erroneous, superstitious, and heretical" by Innocent VIII's papal commission:

9>9. There is no science that assures us more of the divinity of Christ than magic and Cabala.

Yates tells us that "what exactly he meant by this amazing statement is nowhere fully explained," although she speculates that the thesis might be tied to a concept "of the Eucharist as a kind of *Magia*."⁸⁵ In fact, however, Pico explained his views on this issue in detail in the *Apology*, on two pages that Yates cites four

⁸¹ Yates (1964: 84). On magic in the Cabala, see also the notes on Wirszubski (1989) and Copenhaver (1997) in my commentary.

⁸² Cf. theses 9>16–18, 11>12 and notes; *Apology*, in *Opera*, 172.

⁸³ *Apology*, in *Opera*, 172.

⁸⁴ Cf. thesis 9>6.

⁸⁵ Yates (1964: 105–6). If Yates were right, this would have been a particularly hard sell for Pico at Rome.

DECIPHERING THE 900 THESES

times for other purposes.⁸⁶ Our certainty concerning Christ's divinity comes from the way in which he performed miracles (*ex modo faciendi miracula*). And the fact that Christ performed miracles, and did so supernaturally, is known to us exclusively through the testimony of Scripture. If, however, any human sciences can help us *confirm* Christ's divinity, these are natural magic and that part of Cabala that is not a revealed science. The rest of Pico's defense distinguishes sharply between the powers of natural magic and God's divine powers—presumably why Yates chose not to cite this passage in her study:

For [to know] this, that Christ's miracles testify to us his divinity, it is first necessary to recognize that they were not accomplished through any natural power but only through the power of God. Second, it is necessary to know that Christ had that power from himself and not from anything else. In [regard to] the first [point], no human science can help us more than that which understands the powers and activities of natural agents, and their mutual applications and proportions, and their natural strengths, and recognizes what they can and cannot do through their own power. And among the human sciences, the science that knows the most about this is the one that I call "natural magic"—on which my conclusions were posited—and that part of the Cabala that concerns the powers of celestial bodies. Because through these it is known that those works that Christ performed could not be done by means of natural powers.⁸⁷

The fact that Pico originally planned to defend his thesis on Christ's divinity in this pedestrian fashion—and was not backtracking in the *Apology* to save his skin—is confirmed by the wording of the two theses that immediately precede it in his magical conclusions. The second of these (the orthodoxy of the first was never questioned) was reluctantly admitted by the papal commission to be "true and tolerable," although it complained that the thesis could easily "be taken to a bad sense, since it is connected with magical things".⁸⁸

9>7. The works of Christ could not have been performed through either the way of magic or the way of Cabala.

⁸⁶ *Opera*, 171–72. (Yates 1964: 89 n. 1, 90 n. 1, 105 n. 2, 106 n. 2). The first of these notes provides us with a long Latin quotation that covers every point discussed on those pages except this one.

⁸⁷ *Opera*, 172.

⁸⁸ Dorez and Thuasne (1897: 136).

CHAPTER THREE

9>8. The miracles of Christ are the most certain argument of his divinity, not because of the things that he did, but because of the way in which he did them (*non ratione rei facta, sed ratione modi faciendi*).

In conclusion, it should be noted that Pico believed that one part of Cabala drew down not only celestial powers but powers in the intellectual or angelic nature as well; evidence also shows that Pico thought that part of natural magic tapped celestial as well as sublunary forces. Recognition of hierarchical distinctions of power in both natural magic and Cabala was a predictable feature of Pico's syncretic system and is repeatedly suggested in the theses themselves. With this granted, the evidence shows that the two central claims in Yates's reading of Pico's magic—her identification of his *magia naturalis* with Ficino's celestial magic and her association of his "practical Cabala" exclusively with powers "beyond the stars"—are both fundamentally in error.

5. *Pico's magic was not operative in any simple sense.* One final problem in Yates's interpretation of Pico's magic lies in her picture of its goals and historical significance. Like Walker before her, Yates admitted that much of Pico's magic was more concerned with regenerating the soul than with material manipulation of the world. But she also claimed that Pico "formulated a new position for European man" in his magic, endorsing operational views of nature that paved the way for modern science.

One problem in this interpretation arises from its assumptions about what Pico and other Renaissance *magi* meant by magical "works." One side of Renaissance magic—although this was equally true of ancient and medieval magic—could be plausibly linked to modern science insofar as it aimed in some way at improving the conditions of human life. We only need to think here of the medical magic in the ancient and medieval medical works drawn on by both Pico and Ficino.⁸⁹ Outside of this clearly operative side of magic, however, Renaissance writers also used the term magical "works" to describe different ways of acquiring occult

⁸⁹ Pico apparently practiced "magic" of this sort himself, as Petrus Crinitus tells us in a suggestive passage of his *De honesta disciplina* (see Kibre 1936: 101). Here we find that when the classicist Ermolao Barbaro came down with the plague in Rome, Pico sent his friend a magical antidote that he reportedly "concocted from the oil of scorpions and the tongues of asps and other poisons of the same sort." Kibre points out (pp. 101–8) that a surprisingly large segment of Pico's library consisted of Greek, Latin, and Arabic medical treatises, most of which would have discussed magic of one sort or another.

knowledge, sought for contemplative or prophetic reasons more often than for material ends.⁹⁰ One such type of “magic” involved esoteric means of textual exegesis; thus Pico’s theses on the Orphic hymns are entitled “Thirty-one conclusions according to my own opinion on understanding the Orphic hymns according to magic, that is, the secret wisdom of divine and natural things first discovered in them by me.”⁹¹ Pico’s meaning is suggested in the following theses:

10>20. Through the seven hymns attributed to the paternal mind—to Protoponos, Pallas, Saturn, Venus, Rhea, Law, and Bacchus—a knowledgeable and profound contemplator can predict something about the end of the world.

10>21. The work of the preceding hymns is nothing without a work of Cabala, whose property it is to practice every formal quantity, continuous and discrete.

The magical “work” in these theses—which apparently involved *gematria* or other word-number translations to calculate the seven ages of the world (one symbolized by each “god” in 10>20)—refers to prophetic exegesis and not to material operations of any quasi-technological sort. Much of Pico’s magic was clearly of this variety and can be included in the “practical part of natural science” that he identified with *magia naturalis* only in the sense that it involved an esoteric means of reading texts. Indeed, Pico apparently viewed any exegetical method that yielded secret wisdom as just as magical as the celestial magic discussed by Yates.

The *Oration* and *Apology* provide us with further information on this contemplative brand of magic. It was evidently this kind that Pico had in mind when, drawing on Porphyry, he tells us that in the Persian language *magus* means “interpreter and worshipper of divine things.”⁹² This natural magic seeks out “the hid-

⁹⁰ In his attack on Pico’s theses, Petrus Garcias (1489: H4v) adopted a succinct definition of magic (probably not original to him) that carefully balanced the prophetic and material sides of magic—and which probably could have been accepted by Pico himself: “*Magia secundum communiter loquentes est ars cognoscendi et divinandi occulta faciendaque magna et mirifica in natura*” [Magic according to the common way of speaking is the art of knowing and divining hidden things and of making great and wonderful things in nature].

⁹¹ Title to theses 10>1–31.

⁹² *Opera*, 327, 120; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 148; cf. Porphyry *De abstinencia* 4.16.

den wonders in the recesses of the world, in the bosom of nature, in the store-rooms and secrets of God." And contemplation of this leads to religion. For this magic

excites the admiration of the work of God so that thus prepared, love, faith, and hope must surely follow. For nothing moves anyone more to the worship of God than diligent contemplation of the *mirabilia* of God. So that when we have fully explored these wonders through this natural magic that I speak of, animated more ardently to worship and love of the Maker, we shall be compelled to sing: "The heavens are full, all the earth is full of the majesty of thy Glory!" [Isa. 6:3].⁹³

And here we can recall that for Pico, natural philosophy—of which natural magic was the "apex and summit" (*apex et fastigium*)—was the third of the four types of studies (moral philosophy, dialectic, natural philosophy, and theology) that prepared man for the mystical ascent.⁹⁴ A great deal of evidence suggests that much of Pico's magic—probably most of it—concerned this contemplative magic rather than any crass material operations in the world.

This notwithstanding, Pico does suggest that certain parts of natural magic involve material operations—including, as was true of one part of Cabala, operations of an astrological kind:

9>5. No power exists in heaven or earth seminally and separated that the magician cannot actuate and unite.

Operative goals of some kind are also suggested in the following conclusions:

9>3. Magic is the practical part of natural science.

9>4. From that conclusion and the forty-seventh paradoxical dogmatizing conclusion, it follows that magic is the noblest part of natural science.

Here Pico was referring to what in the final version of his text was his forty-sixth "paradoxical dogmatizing conclusion," which reads:

3>46. Given any practical object, the operation that acts on it (*quae eum practicat*) is nobler than that which contemplates it, if all other things are equal.

⁹³ *Opera*, 328, 121–22; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 152–54.

⁹⁴ *Apology*, in *Opera*, 170. Cf. above, pp. 39ff.

Taken together, these theses seem not only to condone but to require us to work magic in the world. But it is a mistake to think that such operations have much in common with modern science. Later Renaissance *magi* living on the edge of the scientific revolution, like Giovanni Della Porta, might have considered magic as a way for man "to control his destiny through science," to recall Yates's words. But we have seen too much of Pico to expect to find him supporting this view. Why should "divine" man, who was capable of union with God, become involved in the material realm?

The answer to this question underlines a profound difference between typical premodern and modern attitudes towards nature. The *magus*, as Pico pictured him, was not a transformer of nature but its "minister." Following the principle that "every inferior nature is governed by whatever is immediately superior to itself," mankind, according to Pico, is ruled by the lowest order of angels and in turn is entrusted with governing the material world. Once the soul has been elevated by philosophical studies to the contemplative seat of the Cherubim, it is prepared to rise to God like the Serafim and descend to the world like angelic Thrones, "well instructed and prepared, to the duties of action."⁹⁵

The operative side of Pico's magic is best interpreted in terms of the traditional concepts of cosmic fall and redemption, which are discussed in a Christological context in the *Heptaplus*.⁹⁶ Just as the whole universe was corrupted by the fall of man—a result of the cosmic correspondences in the "man the microcosm" concept—so following his mystical purification *homo magus* receives the power to raise fallen nature with himself, to "actuate" and "unite" the cosmos, "to marry the world"—just as Christ "marries" the soul prepared by philosophy for the mystical ascent.⁹⁷ The suggestion is that the operative side of Pico's magic was linked to a general plan for cosmic salvation—a view fitting in perfectly with the eschatological goals of his Vatican debate.

This interpretation finds strong support in the following magical theses linking the "man the microcosm" concept—implied in the first and last theses in the series—with the soul's mystical redemption and with the magician's actuation, union, and marriage of the world:

9>10. What man the *magus* makes through art, nature made naturally making man [i.e., the whole cosmos is united in his nature].

⁹⁵ *Commento*, in Garin, *Scritti vari*, 539–40; *Oration*, in *Opera*, 316; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 112.

⁹⁶ *Heptaplus* 5.7, in *Opera*, 40; Garin, *Scritti vari*, 304ff.

⁹⁷ Cf. above, pp. 41–46.

CHAPTER THREE

9>11. The miracles of the magical art exist only through the union and actuation of those things that exist seminally and separated in nature.

9>12. The form of all magical power comes from the soul of man standing, and not falling.

9>13. To operate magic is nothing other than to marry the world.

9>14. If there is any nature immediate to us that is either simply rational, or at least exists for the most part rationally, it has magic in its summit, and through its participation in men can be more perfect. (785)

Summary and conclusions

In Pico's magic, we find a wide range of magical ideas joined in the hierarchical and correlative patterns typical of syncretic systems. The complexities of these broad and often only partially synthesized systems are underlined by the difficulties that historians have had in interpreting their details. The main problem in the standard account of Pico's magic, advanced by Frances Yates over three decades ago, lay in its equation of Pico's *magia naturalis* with Ficino's celestial magic in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*—an equation arising from the traditional view that Pico was Ficino's "disciple." As we have seen in this section, Pico's magical writings antedated Ficino's by several years, developed a view of "natural magic" that was significantly different from Ficino's, and from the start included a wider range of magical traditions (including Cabala) than that found in Ficino's later magical works.

Whether it is useful to speak with Yates of a Renaissance magical revival at all is an open question. If we insist that such a revival started with Pico and Ficino, then all evidence points to the nine hundred theses as its public starting point. The many different kinds of magic and Cabala discussed in Pico's theses suggest that his magic was rather more complex and varied than suggested by Walker or Yates. Finally, Yates's claim that Pico's magic prepared the way for scientific attitudes towards the world—simply a new twist on an old Burckhardtian theme—is difficult to reconcile with the views that Pico advances of the *magus* as cosmic priest. The stress that Pico placed on those views provides further suggestions that his planned Vatican council did not aim simply at a restoration of knowledge—but ultimately at the regeneration of the entire cosmos.