

# Renaissance and Reformation

## Renaissance et Réforme



## Introduction

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Volume 42, Number 4, Fall 2019

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

Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) : Foi, Antiquité et chasse aux sorcières

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068572ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068572ar>

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Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Herzig, T. (2019). Introduction. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(4), 11–16. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068572ar>

# Introduction

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A reassessment of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's thought is perfectly suited for a special issue of *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*. This is because the convergence of the literary and philosophical traits of Pico's oeuvre with his overarching religious concerns turns him into an important figure both for the cultural and intellectual history of Renaissance Italy and for the religious history of Reformation Europe. Gianfrancesco Pico (1469–1533), count of Mirandola and nephew of the better-known philosopher Giovanni Pico (1463–94), was an erudite scholar who wrote important philosophical tracts and corresponded with celebrated humanists. While befriending leaders of humanism, he strove to refute some of the key notions underlying their thought. Known to be a devout Christian, Gianfrancesco engaged not only in the composition of hagiographic and demonological texts but also in the acquisition of relics, in exorcizing demoniacs, and in a ruthless persecution of witches.

Whereas his writings document his main religious and cultural interests, Gianfrancesco's actions bear witness to his partaking in the political conflicts and family manoeuvring that characterized the turbulent years of the Italian Wars. Unlike his more famous uncle, who was only six years his elder, Gianfrancesco evidently did not shy away from craving secular power. Indeed, he even purchased the hereditary title to Mirandola from Giovanni. Gianfrancesco's brothers, however, opposed his rule; in 1502 they succeeded in conquering his land, and he went into exile.

Seeking not only papal but also imperial support for his efforts to regain his patrimony, Gianfrancesco travelled to cities in the Holy Roman Empire. Establishing ties with local intellectuals and having his works published by German presses, he thus facilitated the transmission of religious ideals and cultural forms across the Alps in the course of his attempts to rectify the setbacks in his political fortunes. In 1514, he finally reached an agreement with Francesca Trivulzio, the widow of one of his brothers, leaving her and her juvenile son in control of Concordia and its surrounding territory while

enabling him to regain Mirandola and its vicinity. Notwithstanding this agreement, Gianfrancesco's feuds with his relatives continued to mark the last nineteen years of his life—which ended with his assassination by his own nephew, Galeotto II Pico, in 1533.<sup>1</sup>

Much influenced by the teaching of the Dominican prophet and reformer Girolamo Savonarola (1452–98), with whom he had become acquainted during his sojourn in Florence, Pico remained one of Fra Girolamo's staunchest devotees after the latter's condemnation and public execution in 1498. He wrote three apologetic defenses of Fra Girolamo and also composed a *vita* of the Dominican friar. Although he shared the friar's preoccupation with clerical sinfulness and venerated him as a saintly martyr, Gianfrancesco, like most Italian critics of ecclesiastical corruption, never considered breaking with the Church of Rome.<sup>2</sup> Troubled by the initial success of the Lutheran revolt, he even went as far as denouncing Martin Luther (1483–1546) as “the worst heresiarch in history.”<sup>3</sup> The devout count also willingly collaborated with Dominican inquisitors in the pursuit of heresy—most notoriously in his enthusiastic support of the anti-witchcraft campaign in Mirandola.

In 1522–23, over sixty accused witches were tried in Gianfrancesco's domain, and seven of them were publicly executed. Three additional culprits who fled from prison met their deaths in 1525. Gianfrancesco's personal involvement in the witch trials had clear political motivations, because some of the suspects resided in Francesca Trivulzio's domain, and her protector, the marquis of Mantua, attempted to impede the proceedings against them. To counter the growing criticism of the Mirandolese prosecutions, Gianfrancesco Pico composed the best-known Italian Renaissance book on witchcraft, *Strix, Sive de ludificatione daemonoum* in 1523.<sup>4</sup> Three years later, the indefatigable

1. Tamar Herzig, “Pico, Gianfrancesco,” in *Dizionario storico dell'Inquisizione*, ed. Adriano Prosperi with the collaboration of John Tedeschi and Vincenzo Lavenia (Pisa: Edizioni della Scuola Normale Superiore, 2011), 3:1208–09. See also Gabriella Zarri, “Pico della Mirandola, Gianfrancesco,” in *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft: The Western Tradition*, ed. Richard M. Golden (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2006), 3:898–99.

2. See David S. Peterson, “Out of the Margins: Religion and the Church in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 53 (2000): 835–79, 855–57.

3. Cited in Massimo Firpo, *Gli affreschi di Pontormo a San Lorenzo: Eresia, politica e cultura nella Firenze di Cosimo I* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997), 343 (my translation).

4. Tamar Herzig, “The Demons' Reaction to Sodomy: Witchcraft and Homosexuality in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Strix*,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34.1 (2003): 53–72.

count met the Dominican visionary Caterina da Racconigi (1486–1547), and shortly afterward he began writing her hagiographic legend, which in some respects was aimed at complementing and corroborating his arguments in *Strix*.<sup>5</sup>

More than four centuries after his cruel death, the publication of Charles B. Schmitt's seminal study of Gianfrancesco Pico's critique of Aristotle in 1967 bolstered scholarly interest in the tormented, yet prolific, count of Mirandola.<sup>6</sup> Italian historians Albano Biondi and Gabriella Zarri illustrated Gianfrancesco's contribution to shaping the religious climate in northern Italy during the Italian Wars. Zarri's pathbreaking studies revealed Gianfrancesco's support of reform-minded visionary women who were reputed for sanctity, whereas Biondi, who in 1989 published a critical edition of Leandro Alberti's vernacular translation of *Strix*, called attention to the count's active involvement in the Mirandolese witch-hunt.<sup>7</sup> Gianfrancesco's dialogue later figured in the influential monographs of literary scholars Walter Stephens and Armando Maggi.<sup>8</sup>

The burgeoning of studies dealing with the Savonarolan movement published around the fifth centenary of Fra Girolamo's arrival in Florence brought about reexaminations of Gianfrancesco's ties with the Frate and of his pivotal role in the initial formation of Savonarola's cult.<sup>9</sup> It also led to the

5. Tamar Herzig, "The *Santa viva* and the Dragon: Witchcraft and Religion in the Writings of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola," in *Scritture, carismi, istituzioni: Percorsi di vita religiosa in età moderna. Studi per Gabriella Zarri*, ed. Concetta Bianca and Anna Scattigno (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018), 139–50. See also Zarri's article in this volume.

6. Charles B. Schmitt, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1469–1533) and His Critique of Aristotle* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1967).

7. Gabriella Zarri, "Le sante vive: Per una tipologia della santità femminile nel primo Cinquecento," *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 6 (1980): 371–445; Gabriella Zarri, "Caterina da Racconigi," in *Il grande libro dei santi: Dizionario enciclopedico*, ed. ClAUDIO Leonardi et al. (Turin: Edizioni San Paolo, 1998), 1:390–94; Albano Biondi, "Gianfrancesco Pico e la repressione della stregoneria: Qualche novità sui processi Mirandolesi del 1522–1523," in *Mirandola e le terre del basso corso del Secchia dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea*, ed. Giordano Bertuzzi (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana, 1983), 1:331–49; Gianfrancesco Pico, *Libro detto Strega o delle illusioni del Demonio del Signore Giovanfrancesco Pico dalla Mirandola nel volgarizzamento di Leandro Alberti*, ed. Albano Biondi (Venice: Marsilio, 1989).

8. Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Armando Maggi, *In the Company of Demons: Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

9. Elisabetta Schisto, "La tradizione manoscritta della *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae* di Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola," in *Studi savonaroliani: Verso il quinto centenario*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence:

publication of critical editions of Gianfrancesco's Latin *vita* of Savonarola and of its anonymous vernacular rendition.<sup>10</sup> These were followed, in the twenty-first century, by an edition of Gianfrancesco's hagiography of the Savonarolan holy woman Caterina da Racconigi and by several editions of the original Latin version of *Strix*.<sup>11</sup>

The last decade also witnessed a growing interest in Gianfrancesco's philosophical writings. Intellectual historian Gian Mario Cao has drawn attention to the peculiar traits of his contribution to the evolution of the skeptical tradition in early modern Europe, and published the text of his *De reformandis moribus oratio*.<sup>12</sup> Stressing the centrality of faith and of the imagination in Gianfrancesco Pico's thought, Lucia Pappalardo has analyzed the connections between the count's revival of ancient skepticism, his fideistic approach, and his anti-Aristotelianism.<sup>13</sup>

The present volume brings together scholars of Renaissance philosophy, literature, and religious history, whose work centres on the younger Pico's writings. Drawing on more than half a century of advances in our understanding of Gianfrancesco's works, their sources, and their influence, each one of the contributions in this special issue illuminates different aspects in the evolution of Gianfrancesco's complex thought.

Walter Stephens analyzes Gianfrancesco's dialogue on witchcraft against the backdrop of the Mirandolese witchcraft panic. He shows how Gianfrancesco's original understanding of the imaginary nature of the witches'

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SISMEL, 1996), 289–98; see also Tamar Herzig, *Savonarola's Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), especially chapters 2 and 4–6.

10. Gianfrancesco Pico, *Vita di Hieronimo Savonarola (volgarizzamento anonimo)*, ed. Raffaella Castagnola (Florence: SISMEL, 1998); Gianfrancesco Pico, *Vita Hieronymi Savonarolae*, ed. Elisabetta Schisto (Florence: Olschki, 1999).

11. Gianfrancesco Pico, *La sorcière: Dialogue en trois livres sur la tromperie des démons*, ed. and trans. Alfredo Perifano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007); Gianfrancesco Pico, *Strix sive de ludificatione daemonum*, ed. Lucia Pappalardo (Rome: Città Nuova, 2016); Gianfrancesco Pico, *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, ed. Linda Pagnotta (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

12. Gian Mario Cao, "Pico della Mirandola Goes to Germany: With an Edition of Gianfrancesco Pico's *De reformandis moribus oratio*," *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico di Trento* 30 (2004): 463–525; Gian Mario Cao, *Scepticism and Orthodoxy: Gianfrancesco Pico as a Reader of Sextus Empiricus* (Pisa: Serra, 2007).

13. Lucia Pappalardo, *Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola: Fede, immaginazione e scetticismo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015).

transgressions in his *De imaginatione* (1501) was eventually reversed in *Strix*, which conceded their physical reality. Stephens also presents Gianfrancesco's dialogue as the first book on witches to include a literary representation of a stereotypical female witch, who serves as an "expert witness" for the horrendous crimes committed by members of the diabolic sect.

Gabriella Zarri demonstrates how Gianfrancesco's insistence on the reality of the witches' flight to the Sabbath in *Strix* was reiterated in his later hagiography of Caterina da Racconigi. Zarri proposes that Gianfrancesco's *Compendio delle cose mirabili di Caterina da Racconigi*, completed in 1532, represents the culmination of his mature religious outlook. The work weaves together his concern over diabolic machinations on earth with his Savonarola-inspired refutation of "superstitious" modes of predicting the future, on which he had already dwelt in *De Rerum Praenotione* (1502). Nonetheless, the *Compendio* goes beyond Fra Girolamo's conceptualization of prophecy by stressing the importance of miracles in proving the veracity of prophetic inspiration—an aspect that Gianfrancesco also accentuated in his *Vita Savonarolae* (ca. 1514–30).

*Strix* also serves as a point of departure for Lucia Pappalardo's exploration of Gianfrancesco's rejection of the prevalent understanding of the concept of *fabula* in Renaissance philosophy. Pappalardo demonstrates how, under Savonarola's aegis, Gianfrancesco distanced himself from the positive appreciation of *fabulae* in humanistic thought. Expressing a fideistic approach, Gianfrancesco's attitude toward classical myths and poetry in *Strix* reflected the terminology employed by early Christian apologetics in their attempts to discredit ancient Greek religion.

Marco Piana focuses on one of Gianfrancesco's least studied literary works, the heroic poem *Staurostichon* (1502–03), as a case study illustrating the transmission of devotional forms and religious symbols that evolved in the Italian peninsula across the Alps. Expounding the significance of blood piety in the post-Joachimite prophetic tradition of late medieval Italy—which found its utmost expression in the blood imagery of Girolamo Savonarola—Piana convincingly argues that it influenced Gianfrancesco's religious poems, and especially the *Staurostichon*. This heroic poem, then, was shaped by Italian devotional concerns, even though it centred on miraculous events that purportedly occurred in the Holy Roman Empire and was geared primarily to a German readership.

Denis Robichaud's contribution compares Gianfrancesco Pico's conceptualization of the Platonic tradition with Ficino's understanding of this tradition. Through an analysis of sections from Gianfrancesco's *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium*, Robichaud contrasts Ficino's notion of continuity between the successors of the *prisca theologia* and the Platonic Academies with Pico's stress on the *prisca theologia*'s role as a cause of discord, paganism, and diabolic heresy. Robichaud further explains how Gianfrancesco's critique of the ancient Platonic traditions was aimed at curtailing the influence of humanistic Academies that drew inspiration from these precedents during his own lifetime.

In the final article in this volume, Ovanes Akopyan delineates the main arguments in Gianfrancesco Pico's confutations of astrology, both in his *De Rerum Praenotione* and in the lesser-known *Quaestio de falsitate astrologiae* (1510). Akopyan points to Gianfrancesco's indebtedness both to Giovanni Pico's tract against astrology and to the anti-astrological stance of Girolamo Savonarola. Nonetheless, Akopyan's close reading of Gianfrancesco's writings also reveals the count's divergence from the ideas upheld by these two influential thinkers.