

PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA AND THE CABALA

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Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, D. Phil., Oxon, (1953-2012), was an eminent professor of Western Esotericism at the University of Exeter (<http://centres.exeter.ac.uk/lexesesol/>) and co-founder of the European Society for the Study of Western Esotericism. In this article, Professor Goodrick-Clarke introduces us to the extraordinary influence of Pico della Mirandola and the Cabala on Western thought.

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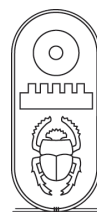


Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), a young contemporary of *Marsilio Ficino developed an even more powerful variety of Renaissance magic by introducing the Jewish Kabbalah into Western thought. Pico's wealth, nobility, personal charm, and handsome face have combined with his precocious brilliance and early death to make him one of the famous figures of the Renaissance. Unlike Ficino, the retiring cleric and scholar, Pico led a varied life within the few years granted to him. His ambitious claims for Renaissance magic initially brought him into conflict with various theologians, and his work was condemned by Pope Innocent VIII. He is most famous for his Oration on the Dignity of Man (1487), which proclaims the centrality, importance, and freedom of man in the universe.

Pico was a younger son in the family of the counts of Mirandola and Concordia, who ruled as feudal lords over a small territory in northern Italy. Destined by his mother for a Church career, he was named papal protonotary at the age of ten and began to study canon law at Bologna in 1477, at age thirteen. Two years later, he commenced the study of philosophy at the University of Ferrara, subsequently moving in 1482 to the University of Padua, one of the leading Aristotelian centers. Here he

was the pupil of the Jewish philosopher Elia del Medigo. At this time he was in touch with humanist scholars in different places, and he visited Florence repeatedly, where he met Ficino. He spent the following years at home and on various visits, while continuing the study of Greek. In 1486, he returned to Florence, but, after becoming involved in a strange love affair, he moved to Perugia, where he studied Hebrew and Arabic under the guidance of several Jewish teachers, including the mysterious Flavius Mithridates.¹

This period marked the beginning of his interest in the Jewish Kabbalah, a medieval mystical and speculative tradition that claimed an ancient origin but was in fact much influenced by Neoplatonism. Pico's Christian Cabala (the Latin term was usual among Renaissance Christian writers) was based on the tradition developed by Jews in Spain during the Middle Ages. Although the Jews were not finally expelled from Spain until 1492, their persecution by the Catholic authorities there had already encouraged many to flee to France and Italy. Pico learned the Kabbalah direct from the Spanish Jew Flavius Mithridates and others. This cultural transfer of Jewish wisdom from the West comparable to the earlier import of Greek learning from the East enabled Pico to immerse himself in this Jewish mystical and magical system.



This medieval Jewish Kabbalah was based on the ten *sephiroth* and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The doctrine of the *sephiroth* was first laid down in the Book of Creation (*Sefer Yetzirah*), dating back to the third century A.D., when Greek Jews were also receptive to the Neoplatonist currents of late antiquity. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a particular esoteric teaching emerged in Provence and northern Spain with the Book of Illumination (*Sefer Bahir*), composed by Isaac the Blind (fl. 1190–1210). This Kabbalah interpreted the *sephiroth* as powers of God arranged in a specific structure. The *Bahir* was also the first text to describe the *sephiroth* as a “tree of emanation,” which from the fourteenth century onward was depicted in a detailed diagram widely familiar today as the Tree of Life. The *Bahir* also aided the development of speculative Kabbalah based on the *sephiroth* as cosmic principles arranged in a primal group of three major emanations above a lower group of seven. The doctrine was developed further in the Book of Splendor (*Sefer Zohar*), written in Spain during the thirteenth century, which represents the tradition adopted by Pico. The *sephiroth* are the ten names or expressions of God, and the created universe is seen as the external manifestation of these forces. This creative aspect of the *sephiroth* links them to cosmology, and there is a relationship between the ten *sephiroth* and the ten spheres of the cosmos, composed of the spheres of the seven planets, the sphere of fixed stars, and the higher spheres beyond these.²

The ten *sephiroth* are arranged in a cosmological system known as the Tree of Life, whose structure provides for twenty-two pathways between the various spheres. These pathways correspond to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet but also denote angels or divine spirits which act as intermediaries throughout the

system and are themselves arranged in hierarchies. Similarly, there are also bad angels or demons, organized in hierarchies corresponding to their good opposites. Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism was also connected with the Scriptures through three kinds of exegetical techniques based on manipulations of the words and letters of the Hebrew text, known as *gematria*, *notarikon*, and *themurah*. These ideas derived from the *Ginnat Egoz* (*Garden of Nuts*), written in 1274 by the Castilian Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla (ca. 1247–1305), a pupil of the famous Kabbalist Abraham ben Samuel Abulafia (1240—ca. 1292), who had introduced an ecstatic Kabbalah whereby the *sephiroth* led on to the mystical contemplation to the Divine Names of the Creator. These exercises were typically mystical, but there was also a magical side to Kabbalah. As a means of approaching the *sephiroth*, seventy-two angels could be invoked by a person who knew their names and numbers, and these were also efficient if Hebrew words, letters, or signs were suitably arranged.

Pico discerned a wonderful symmetry between the Kabbalah and Hermeticism. The Egyptian lawgiver Hermes Trismegistus had revealed mystical teachings, including an account of Creation which hinted at his knowledge of Moses’ wisdom. In Pico’s view, the Kabbalah offered a further body of mystical doctrine, supposedly derived from the Hebrew lawgiver, and a parallel view on cosmology. Armed with a greater knowledge of Hebrew than any other non-Jewish scholar and his burning interest in the Kabbalah, Pico set down a new synthesis of Hermetic-Cabalistic magic in twenty-six “Magical Conclusions.”

Here Pico dismissed medieval magic as the work of the devil but praised “natural magic” as a legitimate establishment of links between heaven and earth by the proper use of natural substances as recommended by the principles of sympathetic magic

(Magical Conclusion 1). He went on to recommend Orphic incantations for magical purposes (Magical Conclusion 2), evidently referring to Ficino's magic, whose practices he already knew well through the Academy at Florence.³

Flushed with confidence in the powers of Cabala, Pico then described the limitations of Ficinian practice. Pico regarded Ficino's natural magic as a weak and ineffective form of magic unless it was combined with Cabala (Magical Conclusion 15). Similarly, he held that no powerful magic could be performed without a knowledge of Hebrew (Magical Conclusion 22) and even dismissed the Orphic singing for magical operations in the absence of Cabala (Magical Conclusion 21). In his *Cabalistic Conclusions and Apology* (1487), Pico distinguishes between various forms of Cabala. "Speculative Cabala" he divides into four types: first, the mystical manipulation of letters, followed by the exploration of the three worlds—the sensible or terrestrial world, the celestial world of the stars, and the supercelestial world of the *sephiroth* and the angels.⁴

These latter categories were of prime importance to Pico's magic. Pico asserts that this kind of Cabala is a "way of capturing the powers of superior things" and is "the supreme part of natural magic." Whereas natural magic aims no higher than the terrestrial world and the stars, Cabala can be used to operate beyond in the supercelestial spheres of the angels, archangels, the *sephiroth*, and God. Natural magic uses characters, but Cabala uses numbers through its use of letters (Magical Conclusion 25). Natural magic uses only intermediary causes, the stars. Cabala goes straight to the first cause, God himself (Magical Conclusion 26).⁵

Pico elaborates in his *Apology* how cabalists may use the secret Hebrew names of God and names of angels,

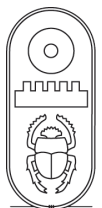


Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

invoking them in the powerful Hebrew language or by magical combinations of the sacred Hebrew alphabet. Just as there are superior spirits on these higher planes, higher spiritual beings, great demons also inhabit these regions. Pico solemnly warns the cabalist to work in a spirit of piety (Magical Conclusion 6). In his seventy-two Cabalistic Conclusions, Pico demonstrates his detailed knowledge of the Jewish system. He writes that the Cabalist can communicate with God through the archangels in an ecstasy that may result in the death of the body, a way of dying known as the "Death of the Kiss" (Cabalistic Conclusion 11). He sets out a table which shows the correspondences between the ten spheres of the cosmos and the ten *sephiroth* (Cabalistic Conclusion 48). He also describes the states of the soul in relation to the meanings of the ten *sephiroth* (such as unity, intellect, reason) and traditionally links the highest *sephiroth* with the lowest in a circular arrangement (Cabalistic Conclusion 66).⁶

The Oration on the Dignity of Man

Pico's famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was written as an introduction to his





Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (middle) with Agnolo Poliziano (right) and Marsilio Ficino (left). Cosimo Rosselli, Chiesa di S.Ambrogio, Firenze (1484 – 86). <http://www.pico-kabbalah.eu/>

nine hundred theses, which he took with him to Rome in 1486 in order to engage in a great public debate. The *Oration* has rightly been regarded as a masterpiece of rhetoric, celebrating the newfound independence and confidence of Renaissance man. Pico's statement marks the sea-change between the medieval mind and the modern mind, the tremendous growth in man's sense of autonomy and dignity which had grown up with humanism. The *Oration* also rejects as inadequate the traditional grounds for Man's importance in the world: his reason, or his place as the microcosm. Pico claims that Man's true greatness lies in his freedom to become whatever he wants to be. Both animals and angels have their fixed place in the universe and are powerless to change their natures. But God gave to Man, alone of all creatures, no fixed abode, form, or function. Free of such limitations, he has the power to change and develop, to make and mould himself.⁷

What was the ultimate goal of man's existential freedom? Imagining God addressing Adam, Pico attributes to Man

the power to be reborn into the higher forms. Pico opens the *Oration* with the quotation: "A great miracle, Asclepius, is man." Whereas the Fathers of the Church had placed man in a dignified position as the highest of terrestrial beings, as a spectator of the universe, Pico was citing the Hermetic text *Asclepius* with its promise of man's equality with the gods:

"Man is a miracle, a living thing to be worshipped and honored: for he changes his nature into a god's, as if he were a god. . . . Conjoined to the gods by a kindred divinity, he despises inwardly that part of him in which he is earthly."⁸

Introducing the contents of his nine hundred theses, Pico ranges over all the philosophers and mysteries he has studied. A keynote of his *philosophia nova* is an attempt to establish a concordance or correlation between all ancient philosophies in support of a pristine theology (*prisca theologia*). A tribute to his precocious learning (he was only twenty-four), the names of the Latins Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Franciscus de Mayronis, Albertus Magnus, and Henry of Ghent are followed by the Arabs Avicenna, Averroes, and al-Farabi. Further back among the ancients he invokes the Greek Peripatetics and then the Neoplatonists Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus. At the very source of the ancient wisdom stand Pythagoras, Mercurius Trismegistus, Zoroaster, and the "Hebrew Cabalist wisemen," whose knowledge, Pico asserts, was later detected by al-Kindi, Roger Bacon, and William of Paris.⁹ However, the great themes of Magia

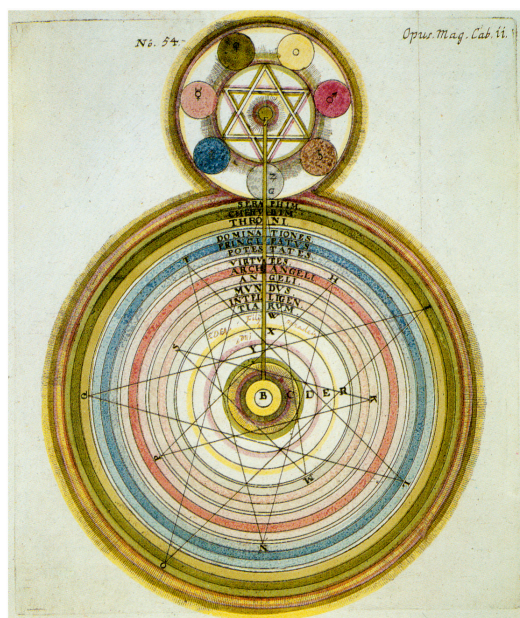
and Cabala echo through the *Oration*. The “ancient theology of Hermes Trismegistus” and “the occult mysteries of the Hebrews” offer the prime means of man’s promotion to the divine realms. “As the farmer weds his elms to vines, even so does the magus wed earth to heaven.” The *Oration* alludes to esoteric knowledge known only to the few. Pico speaks of occult Hebraic law, vouchsafed only to initiates, and he recalls the symbolism of the sphinxes on Egyptian temples, indicating that mystic doctrines should be kept secret from the common herd.¹⁰

Pico’s subsequent career was turbulent. As soon as he published his nine hundred theses, several Roman theologians raised an outcry about their heretical character, and Pope Innocent VIII appointed a commission to examine them. Pico was summoned to appear several times before this commission, and several of the theses were condemned. Undaunted, in May 1487 Pico published, together with part of the *Oration*, an apologia defending the condemned theses. This challenge involved him in fresh difficulties, and bishops with inquisitorial powers were appointed to deal with his case. In July, Pico made a formal submission and retraction to the commission, and in August the pope issued a bull condemning all the theses and forbidding their publication. Lorenzo de’ Medici interceded for Pico with the pope, and Pico was thereafter permitted to live in Florence under Medici protection. On 17 November 1494, the day the armies of King Charles VIII of France entered Florence, Pico died of a fever. He was thirty-one.¹¹

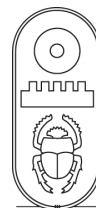
Ficino and Pico were seminal figures in the revival of Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, magic, and Kabbalah in Renaissance Europe. Their interest in the power of sympathetic and Cabalistic magic to effect changes in nature signal a new appreciation

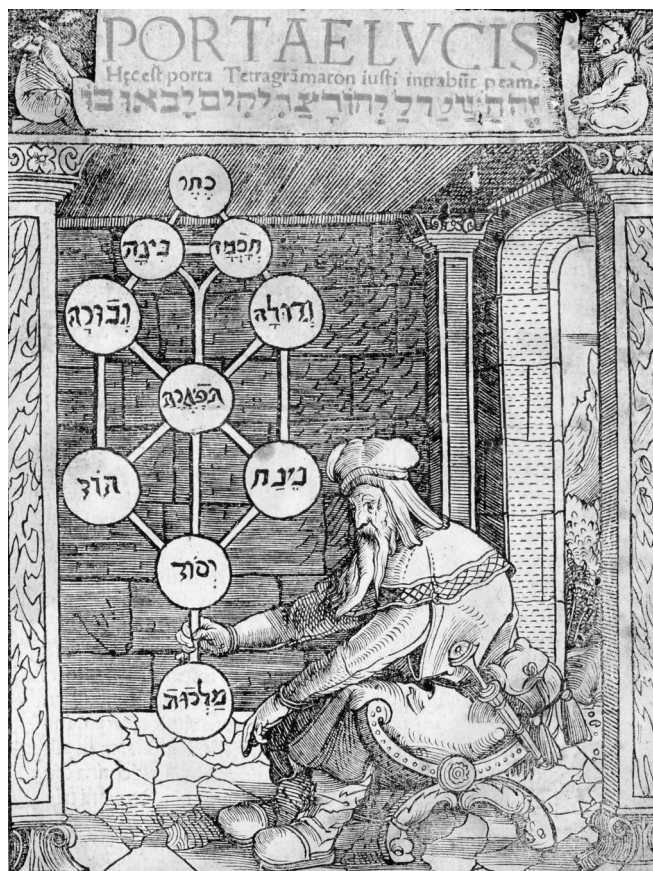
of man’s ability to operate on the mundane world through the knowledge and application of correspondences between the higher and lower worlds. As Frances Yates has suggested, this attitude anticipates the exploration and confidence of natural science. However, their emphasis on the hierarchy of spiritual intermediaries in the form of attributes, letters, numbers, transmutation of the soul indicate that this philosophy of nature was intimately bound up with religious experience and an approach to God. Renaissance magic is thus a form of sacred science.

*Editor’s Note: This article is the second half of the chapter entitled “Italian Renaissance Magic and Cabala” in *The Western Esoteric Traditions: A Historical Introduction* by Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke. The first half of the chapter, published in the *Rosicrucian Digest*, Volume 90, Number 1, 2012, introduced readers to the Neoplatonism of Renaissance Florence and the eminent Neoplatonist, Marsilio Ficino.



No. 54, *Opus Mag. Cab. ii.*





ENDNOTES

1. Frances Yates offers a summary chapter on Pico's life and contribution to Kabbalistic magic in *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 84-116. Cf. Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 54-71. For his Jewish teacher, see Chaim Wirszubski's introduction to his edition of Flavius Mithridates, *Sermo de Passione Dei* (Jerusalem, 1963) and his article "Giovanni Pico's Companion to Kabbalistic Symbolism," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion*, presented to G. G. Scholem (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 353-362.
2. For a helpful account of the historical development of Jewish Kabbalah as a current of Western esotericism, see Kocku von Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, pp. 31-41. Definitive studies of are offered by Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Penguin/ Meridian, 1978), and *Origins of the Kabbalah*, edited by R. J. Werblowsky, translated by A. Arkush (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); *The Early Kabbalah*, edited by Joseph Dan, translated by R. C. Kiener (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).
3. Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 61f, takes up the theme of Pico's syncretism and interest in establishing "concordance" (Faivre's fifth characteristic of esotericism) between the Kabbalah and the Bible within a *prisca theologia* identified with Hermes and Zoroaster. A substantial monograph on Pico's thought with special reference to his Roman debate and the full text of his nine hundred theses is offered by Stephen Alan Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses* (1486), *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 167 (Tempe: Arizona State University Press, 1998).
4. F. A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp. 91, 95.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 98-102.
7. The *Oration on the Dignity of Man* is discussed by Kristeller, *Eight Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 65-68. See also the full English translation of the text and commentary by Kristeller in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, John Herman Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 215-256.
8. Kristeller, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 223; the quotation refers to the sixth passage in the *Asclepius* in Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 69.
9. S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, pp. 204-205, offers an outline of Pico's first 400 theses which trace philosophy from the Latin scholastics back to the harmonious ancients and "Hebrew Cabalist wisemen." This quasihistorical survey reflects Pico's insistence on correspondences within an emanational cosmology. Cf. *Oration*, in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, pp. 242-249.
10. Kristeller, *Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 250.
11. Kristeller, *Eight Italian Philosophers of the Renaissance*, pp. 56-57.