

Reviews

Pietro Pomponazzi. *De incantationibus*.

Ed. Vittoria Perrone Compagni. With Laura Regnicoli. Lessico Intellettuale Europeo 110. Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 2011. cliv + 230 pp. €40. ISBN: 978-88-222-6032-1.

Pietro Pomponazzi's *De incantationibus* is his most radical work. By reducing both ancient and contemporary miracles to natural causes, Pomponazzi questions the miraculous nature of fundamental Christian beliefs: heavenly visions, cures produced by gaze and touch, stigmata, and finally the rise and fall of all religions, produced by astral forces rather than the intervention of a providential deity.

Written in 1520 but published posthumously in 1556 and 1557, manuscripts of this work had a fairly wide distribution shortly after 1520, producing sharp criticism among some readers. Modern translations have been partial or both partial and full of errors, for example, H. Busson, *Les causes des merveilles de la nature, ou Les enchantements* (Paris, 1930). The only complete, current translation — without the benefit of a critical edition — is C. Innocenti, *Gli incantasimi* (Florence, 1997).

With the expert philological and philosophical aid of Laura Regnicoli, as well as her own considerable knowledge of Pomponazzi manuscripts, Perrone Compagni has produced an accurate critical edition based on the sixteen extant manuscripts. In a meticulous examination of each manuscript, Regnicoli analyzes its provenance, script, and probable date. The result of this joint effort is the first critical edition of a major Renaissance philosophical work.

Most recent Italian scholarship has emphasized the contingent and conjectural nature of Pomponazzi's naturalistic conclusions, insisting that these conclusions (due to their tentative and probable status) cannot be understood as attacks on religious doctrine. Craig Martin's recent fine work on Pomponazzi's *Meteorology* (1563) confirms this view. Infallible divine revelation, so the argument runs, cannot be invalidated by human reason. Pomponazzi maintains this position in all his published works as well as in the manuscript sources. Perrone Compagni is a strong supporter of this view, presented here in the introduction to the text.

The assertion of Pomponazzi's heterodoxy, Perrone Compagni argues, is largely based on a misunderstanding of the role of the *leges*, the religious lawmakers. These lawmakers are not power-hungry politicians seeking to impose fables and fictitious stories on the uneducated. Rather, they have both a religious and political function. By making religious doctrine simple and clear to the masses the *leges* employ poetic and metaphorical explanations that stress virtuous conduct. Through the values preached in these doctrines the masses will imbibe and internalize virtue, which then becomes a strong source of their behavior. Social harmony and civic duty thus become an intrinsic part of human behavior, allowing the preservation of the species.

This interpretation of Pomponazzi ignores or undervalues key passages in his works rarely, if ever, cited by proponents of Pomponazzi's sincere fideism. This view fails to take account of the following issues: What does Pomponazzi mean when he says in the *De immortalitate* that the *leges* support immortality, "not caring for truth" but only for producing virtue? What does he mean in the *Apologia* when he says that the religious doctrines (specifically, the doctrine of immortality) are "fictions" or "fables" invented by those who certainly knew that they were not true? Why does he say in the *De incantationibus* that all religions, including Christianity, are produced by the divine intelligences? They all are subject to the natural life cycles of the sublunar world of birth, growth, and decline. Christianity, he notes, is weak because it is approaching its end. Finally, in a rarely cited passage in the *De fato*, Pomponazzi strangely and ironically prefigures Pascal's later wager. It is wiser, he says, to believe in torturing demons after death, for if they exist, your belief protects your orthodoxy and you will not be punished; if they don't exist, you lose nothing as you certainly will not be tortured. Nevertheless, he concludes, Aristotelians do not believe in these demons. Thus Pomponazzi, an Aristotelian, does not believe in hell's demons so dramatically and frighteningly depicted by the greatest Renaissance artists from Van Eyck to Michelangelo. Until scholars supporting Pomponazzi's sincere religiosity address these passages, it will be difficult to accept Pomponazzi's orthodoxy.

Scholars will doubtless continue to debate the meaning of Pomponazzi's *De incantationibus* but now they have an excellent, definitive critical edition, elaborated with scrupulous care, on which to base their differences. This edition will stand with Le May's outstanding critical edition of the *De fato* (1957) as a representative of the finest Renaissance scholarship.

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