

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. *Oration on the Dignity of Man: A New Translation and Commentary.*

Eds. Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. vii + 308 pp. \$95. ISBN: 978-1-107-01587-6.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oratio* is arguably the best-known text of Renaissance philosophy. It was originally intended as an introductory speech to open a public debate in Rome of Pico's 900 theses on a variety of topics, but an ecclesiastical investigation found a handful of the theses to be doctrinally problematic, and the proposed debate was cancelled by Innocent VIII. The *Oratio* was never publicly delivered and was published posthumously in 1496. Despite

such inauspicious beginnings, the *Oratio* has become a celebrated text, subject to a variety of interpretations, even touted at times as a “manifesto of the Renaissance.” This present volume is the result of a collaborative effort of commenting on the *Oratio* via an online platform titled the Pico Project and jointly sponsored by Brown University and the University of Bologna (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/pico/). The result is an impressive collection that includes several substantive essays, a Latin text with an excellent facing-page English translation, a critical overview of the text, and a detailed footnote commentary.

The volume begins with a short history of the Pico Project by Massimo Riva that reflects on the role of new technologies for collaborative projects and on the appearance of hybrid publishing methods. Next appears a lengthy chapter by the late Pier Cesare Bori on the historical and biographical background of Pico’s *Oratio* that originally appeared in Italian in 2000. Bori proposes that Pico viewed the Roman disputation to be the key to rehabilitating his image after a disastrous episode in which Pico attempted to abduct Margherita, the wife of Giuliano de’ Medici. The chapter also includes a detailed conjecture that Pico composed the *Oratio* in four distinct stages. A brief essay by Francesco Borghesi then presents a chronology of the major events in Pico’s life. Next appears a short account by Michael Papio of the printed editions of the *Oratio*. Papio observes that there were no printed editions of Pico’s speech from 1601 to 1905. Francesco Borghesi then presents a substantive historiographical essay that skillfully traces the various approaches that interpreters have taken to the *Oratio*. The last chapter is a lengthy multiauthored overview of the *Oratio* that divides the text into seven sections.

The Latin text of the *Oratio* offered in this volume conforms in general to the text edited by Francesco Bausi and first published in 2003. Bausi’s 2003 text does not always follow the punctuation of the 1496 editio princeps, and it imposes paragraph divisions on what was originally printed as a single block of text. The present edition abandons Bausi’s paragraph divisions in favor of 268 numbered paragraphs, each consisting of one sentence from the *Oratio*. This format facilitates an extremely valuable detailed footnote commentary; the notes are replete with identifications of Pico’s direct sources as well as remarks about possible remote sources. The notes also contain references to other works by Pico and offer important interpretive and philological comments, including discussions of variants of the Latin text that appear in a portion of the *Oratio* that Pico appropriated in his 1487 *Apologia* and a portion that appears in an anonymous rendering of the *Oratio* preserved in ms. Palatino 885.

This volume is a model of collaborative scholarship and constitutes a major contribution to the study of the work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. In meticulous detail, it explores the many sources at Pico’s disposal, examining the way Pico attempted “a highly synthetic — yet generally inclusive — philosophical reconciliation of the multiple ways in which universal (Christian) truth may be articulated” (105). In a work consisting of so many contributors, there are surprisingly few divergences among various chapters. In his introductory essay, Massimo Riva appears to prefer the more-inclusive rendering *On Human Dignity*

for *Oratio de hominis dignitate*, rather than the less-inclusive rendering preserved in the title of the present book. Elsewhere, Francesco Borghesi argues persuasively that *concord* should be preferred over *syncretism* when describing Pico's project of harmonizing various philosophical and theological views, yet another contributor elsewhere in the volume freely uses the term *syncretism* to describe Pico's concordist tendencies. Nevertheless, the volume presents a highly consistent and extremely valuable commentary on Pico's best-known text.

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