

Vives' Fabula de homine as a Dramatic Representation of Pico's Oratio
- Charles Fantazzi²

Pico's famous discourse is surely to be numbered among the greatest speeches that were never given. Pope Innocent VIII and his counsellors saw to it that the ambitious project of the Count of Mirandola would not be realized. 'Ambitious' is too tame an adjective. This unprecedented venture was colossal, extraordinary, as was the entire brief, meteoric career of this 'fenice degli ingegni'. As is well known, Pico had intended this discourse to be a prologue to the 900 theses or *conclusiones* that he was going to present for discussion before the Roman cardinals and theologians assembled together at this ecumenical congress which he had improvised single-handed. The brilliant young scholar entertained the unrealistic ambition that there, before the Papal court, he could somehow achieve unity in doctrinal matters and understanding among men of the most divergent views. While in Rome, he continued to study and prepare himself. He had sent his books ahead of him but he also borrowed books from what is presently the Vatican Library, where his borrower's slips are still extant.

As one can imagine, there was much resentment among the Roman prelates concerning this audacious enterprise. They would probably have murmured such comments as these to one another: 'Who is this arrogant upstart? Who does he think he is? This is Rome, not Mirandola...' You all know the sequel. The Pope established a Commission of inquiry which found thirteen of these theses to be heretical, a token number, no doubt. Pico made his appearance at the first five meetings of the Commission to answer the charges brought against him but declined to appear thereafter. Instead, he responded with an *Apologia*, in which he points out the crass ignorance of his accusers and weaves into it some material straight out of the *Oratio*. It was published with a dedication to Lorenzo de' Medici, making it the only other work besides the theses themselves to be published during Pico's lifetime.

As for the speech itself, it was printed with his collected works by his nephew, Gianfrancesco, years after his death, bearing the humble title *Oratio quaedam elegantissima iuvenili quadam alacritate dictata*.³ It did not acquire the title *De hominis dignitate* until the Strasbourg edition of his

² What follows is essentially the text of a talk given at a combined meeting of the Dutch Association of Neolatinists and the Flemish Association for the Study of Humanism and Neo-Latin on 20 September, 2002, in Ravenstein, with the addition of a few footnotes.

³ *Commentationes Joannis Pici Mirandulae... quibus anteponitur vita per Joannem Franciscum illustris principis Galeotti Pici conscripta...* Bononiae (Benedictus Hectoris Bononiensis) 1496.

works in 1504, published by Jacob Wimpfeling.⁴ The speech is written in a much more ornate style than the theses, as might be expected. By way of a *captatio benevolentiae* he leads his listeners into the argument with an account of his readings on the subject of man. But what readings, *per Dio!* Certainly not the usual authorities. The youthful prodigy makes immediate show of his esoteric knowledge. He quotes a certain Abdallah the Saracen, thought to be Abd Allah Ibn al Muquaffa, an Arab translator of Persian works, who lived in the eighth century. When asked what seemed to him the most wonderful thing to be seen on the stage of the world he is said to have replied that there is nothing more wonderful than man. Pico reinforces this opinion with the famous statement of Hermes Trismegistus, who says to Asclepius in the book of that name: ‘Magnum miraculum est homo.’⁵ The first writer quoted would have been unknown to his listeners, the second less unknown but still rather exotic. A Latin copy of the sayings of the mythical Hermes was known from early times. Indeed Augustine quotes this very phrase in the *City of God* (*De civitate Dei* 10,12). It is interesting, however, to hear how this passage continues in the *Asclepius*: ‘Man is a living thing worthy of worship and honor, for he changes his nature into god’s as if he were a god; he is familiar with the race of demon spirits since he recognizes that he originated among them and he despises that part of him which is human, having placed his faith in his other part, which is divine.’⁶ This unquoted portion of the *Asclepius* is what actually forms the text of the sermon.

Pico goes on to say that as he reflected upon the meaning of these words, he was not convinced by the usual rationalizations of why man was given this privileged position in the scale of being. Man was said to be an intermediary (*internuntius*) in creation, on familiar terms with those above and lord of those beneath him, the interpreter of nature by reason of the acuteness of his senses, the inquisitiveness of his reason, the light of his intellect. He is the intervening space (*interstitium*) between the stability of eternity and the flux of time, the link of the world (*copula mundi*) according to the Persians, nay, the nuptial bond (*hymenaeum*) of the world, and to quote the words of the Psalmist, only a little lower than the angels. Pico rejects these traditional answers as insufficient. ‘Why should we not marvel more at the angels and beatific heavenly choirs?’ he asks. There is

⁴ It retained this title also in the *Omnia quae extant opera... Venetiis* (Hieronymus Scotus) 1557, and *Opera omnia*, Basileae (Henricus Petri) 1557.

⁵ *Asclepius*, 1, 6. (*Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. Nock-Festugière, Paris 1945, Vol. II, p. 301).

⁶ *Ibid.*

another reason for calling man a great miracle. Pico holds his listeners in suspense for a moment, asking for their kind attention.⁷

So begins the solemn discourse that was never given. Before proceeding to the heart of Pico's introduction let us turn to the very different genesis and circumstances of composition of Vives' work. Unlike the wealthy Pico, scion of the noble line of the Counts of Mirandola and Concordia, the young Vives was subject to many restraints and sacrifices. At the time that he wrote the *Fabula* he was eking out a living as a tutor in Leuven. Without the posturing of the Italian prodigy he was a most precocious student himself. As regards the knowledge of Hebrew he was no doubt superior although he was careful never to vaunt this knowledge.

The theatrical and playful character of the *Fabula* is found in other works of this period, the *Aedes legum*, and especially the *Somnium et Vigilia in Somnium Scipionis*, published a few years later. The first part is Vives' own dream upon the dream of Scipio. In a letter to Cranevelt, Vives recounts jokingly that when he announced to the Senate of the University of Leuven that he intended to lecture on the *Dream of Scipio*, they had to deliberate on which faculty it should be assigned to. In Vives' own dream he enters into the realm of sleep, where, in another Senate-House, there is a discussion going on about the reliability of dreams. At this moment a gang of sophists, i.e., Scholastic philosophers, breaks in and creates a great deal of confusion with their incomprehensible gibberish. Vives finally persuades Sleep to lead him into the chamber of Insomnium, a deity who supplies false joys and sorrows to human spirits, but the chattering doctors have infiltrated even there. Finally Vives discerns Cicero among the crowd and asks for his exegesis of the *Somnium Scipionis*.

The same spirit of mockery pervades the *Fabula de homine*, vastly different in tone from the solemn pronouncements of Pico. The piece is dedicated to Antoon van Bergen, who was one of Vives' pupils in Leuven at the time. In the dedicatory letter he states that the fabula is about the stage of the world where everyone plays his part (*mundana scaena*

⁷ The text of the *Oratio* is cited from Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oratio de hominis dignitate* a cura di Eugenio Garin (Pordenone 1994) pp. 2-4: 'Horum dictorum rationem cogitanti mihi non satis illa faciebant, quae multa de humanae naturae praestantia afferuntur a multis: esse hominem creaturarum internuntium, superis familiarem, regem inferiorum; sensuum perspicacia, rationis indagine, intelligentiae lumine, naturae interpretem; stabilis aevi et fluxi temporis interstitium, et (quod Persae dicunt) mundi copulam, immo hymenaeum, ab angelis, teste Davide, paulo deminutum. Magna haec quidem, sed non principalia, id est quae summae admirationis privilegium sibi iure vindicent. Cur enim non ipsos angelos et beatissimos caeli choros magis admiremur?'

Tandem intellexisse mihi sum visus, cur felicissimum proindeque dignum omni admiratione animal sit homo, et quae sit demum illa conditio quam in universi serie sortitus sit, non brutis modo, sed astris, sed ultramundanis mentibus invidiosam. Res supra fidem et mira. Quidni? Nam et propterea magnum miraculum et admirandum profecto animal iure homo et dicitur et existimatur. Sed quaenam res sit audite, Patres, et benignis auribus pro vestra humanitate hanc mihi operam condonate.'

explicitly recalls the opening of Pico's speech). It is significant that in the opening words of the dedication, Vives uses the word *persona*, a word that will figure prominently at the end of the fabula, for the various roles that all things in the universe must play, with man destined to play the principal role. He says that his theme is an ancient one, which together with trivialities contains many serious matters as well, that can spur us on to better things. He admonishes his student in these words: 'Omnia enim quae sunt in humana vita, praeter virtutem, tamquam pueriles lusus, ridicula sunt ac subito utpote inania evanescent.'⁸ Vives returns to these same sentiments in the opening lines of the fabula, which immediately alert the reader of the playful or ludic nature of the piece: 'Libet mihi a ludis fabulisque auspicari hanc meam de homine dissertationem, quoniam et homo ipse lusus ac fabula est.' The tone could hardly be more contrasting with Pico's grand opening, which, as we saw, has all the pomp and circumstance of an inaugural dissertation.⁹

Vives abandons the philosophical mode discourse for the immediacy and concreteness of image and metaphor. He launches immediately into his tale, how at one time Juno had invited all the gods to a celestial banquet to celebrate her birthday.¹⁰ After a lavish feast the gods asked whether she had prepared a postprandial entertainment. To gratify their wishes Juno asked her husband-brother to improvise an amphitheater. Thereupon at a single command this whole universe of ours appeared and the stage was set for the performance. Jupiter, as stage director, prescribed the order and sequence of all the plays, from which the actors could not depart even a hair's breadth. With this simple stage direction Vives distances himself radically from Pico's cosmic scene, where there is no strict sequence of events.

To return to the *Oratio*, you will remember that Pico had left his listeners in suspense concerning what it was that made man a great miracle. In Pico's account, when God, the supreme architect, had completed the great fabric of the universe and filled it with the inhabitants of each realm, he wished that there be someone who could ponder (the Latin verb is *perpenderet*) the scope of his creation, love its beauty and admire its grandeur. So he bethought himself, as a crowning gesture, to create man. Pico gives as his authorities both Moses and the *Timaeus* of Plato, thus linking theology and philosophy. But there was no archetype

⁸ *Joannis Ludovici Vivis Valentini opera omnia*, ed. Gregorio Mayáns y Siscar, (Valencia 1782-1790), Vol. IV, 2.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 3.

¹⁰ *Natalis* with reference to the gods is usually associated with the dedication of an important temple, in this case the temple of Juno Regina on the Aventine.

after which God could model his new creature nor was there a place where he could set this contemplator of the universe. It would not have been worthy of the paternal power to be lacking in its last act of generation, like Epimetheus, in Plato's myth in the *Protagoras*, who exhausted his gifts on brute creation and had nothing left to bestow on man. Thus the supreme artifex decided that since he could not endow this creature with anything peculiar to itself, he would give it all the properties common to each part of creation. He made him a work of indeterminate nature (*indiscretae opus imaginis*) and placed him in the middle of the universe. Extrapolating on the biblical account Pico has God say: (The translations in all instances are my own) 'We have given you no fixed dwelling place nor distinguishing features nor specific prerogatives, O Adam, so that you may have and possess all these things of your own choice and volition. The nature of the rest of creation is contained within certain laws prescribed by us. But you will determine your own nature, constrained by no barriers, according to your own will, at whose disposition I have placed you. In the middle of the universe have I placed you so that from that vantage point you may readily survey all that is contained therein. We have made you neither celestial nor terrestrial, neither mortal nor immortal, so that as a free and sovereign sculptor and fashioner of yourself (Pico uses both a Greek and a Latin word, *plastēs et fīctor*), you may shape your own form. You can degenerate into the lower forms of brute creation or you may be regenerated, by your own decision, into higher things that are divine.'

Pico then offers his own comment on these words of the creator, congratulating man on his singular good fortune. In every man at his birth the Father introduced seeds of every kind (*omnifaria semina*) and germs of every sort of life (*omnigenae vitae germina*), and according as each one cultivates them, so shall they grow and bear their respective fruits in him: for example, if they are vegetable, he will become a plant; if sensual, a brute beast. But if man is not content with the lot of any of these creatures, he will withdraw into the center of his being and becoming one spirit with God in the lonely mists of the Father (*in solitaria Patris caligine*), he who was placed above all things will stand above all things. This astonishing statement, which has an unmistakable Neoplatonic ring, would have need of a lengthy exegesis, but none is given. Instead Pico exclaims: 'Who would not marvel at this chameleon of ours?' and proceeds to draw again on his disparate and esoteric sources. He quotes again the Athenian Asclepius, who said that in the sacred mystery rites this changing nature of man (*versipellis natura*) was symbolized by Proteus (we shall see that Vives will capitalize on this comparison) and also by the metamorphoses

celebrated by the Hebrews and the Pythagoreans. In his usual eclectic fashion Pico cites also from the apocryphal book of Enoch (which he quotes in a pastiche of Hebrew and Aramaic), from Empedocles, even from Mohammed.

In this insistence on man's capacity to become all things, to revert to the vegetative or the bestial or to aspire to the celestial intelligences, Pico sets himself apart from Ficino and earlier writers on the dignity of man. This volubility, one might say, of the crowning part of God's creation makes possible man's freedom to choose. But Pico does not give man unlimited freedom. There is present in Pico's position a Neoplatonic notion that man can only attain to his true dignity by choosing the highest possibility open to him. He is not outside the universal hierarchy but moves within it.

Let us return now to the world stage of the fabula. Instead of Pico's world of abstractions and bodiless quotations we are in the presence of the gods themselves, spectators at the show, who express their admiration for man, (*nihil esse homine admirabilius*), an obvious echo of Pico, and Jupiter himself is delighted to hear their praises of his *Archimimus*. The gods seated nearest him readily saw that this new creature bore a great likeness to his creator. Hidden behind his mask, but at times letting his divine traits appear (*emicans* is the word used), man makes his divine origins manifest, and as his maker is all things, so he transforms himself sometimes into a plant, and at other times, leaving the stage momentarily, he returns as an *ethologus* or *ethopaeus*,¹¹ that is, one who impersonates with mimic gestures the moral traits of various specimens of humanity for the entertainment of guests at a banquet, (a very learned allusion on Vives' part, probably derived from Lucian), and before the divine onlookers the Archmime turns himself successively into various beasts, each one symbolizing a particular passion: the raging lion, the rapacious wolf, the fierce wild boar, the cunning fox, the lustful and filthy sow, the timid hare, the jealous dog, the stupid ass. In this versatile performance of the Archmime Vives seems purposely to take Pico's image and refract it into what is both a scene on the world stage before the gaze of the ancient gods and a graphic, pedagogical demonstration, in the form of Protean mutations, of man's ambiguous nature. Despite the brilliant performance this is somehow not a very flattering portrayal of man; this is not the intermundial creature situated somewhere in space that Pico depicted. What redeems him from all these histrionics is that the actor again leaves

¹¹ The word *ethologus* is found in Cicero, *De oratore*, 2, 242, but *ethopaeus* seems to be an original coinage derived from Greek.

the stage, the curtain is drawn back, and he returns as a prudent, just, companionable, human, kind man living together in cities with others, giving and obeying orders, attending to the public interest and the common good, in a word, *civilis sociusque*. These are the civic virtues of Aristotle and Cicero, which return many times in Vives' works, notably in the *De subventione pauperum*.

The gods thought that this was the end of this creature's transformations when behold he took on their own semblance, at which they demanded of Juno that he should put off his mask and join them in the reviewing stands. No sooner did she make this request of her husband than man mimicked great Jupiter Optimus Maximus himself, surpassing the natures of the minor deities and penetrating to that inaccessible light surrounded by darkness where Jupiter, king of kings and of gods, dwells. Vives boldly applies to the pagan god a scriptural passage (1 Tim 6:16) that had been used also by Pico in the context of the Christian God. Such an adaptation of scripture might well be considered blasphemous save that Vives has told us that it is only a play. So skilful is man's impersonation that the gods themselves are deceived. They think for a moment that Jupiter himself has descended to the stage and they look repeatedly from the actor before them to the throne of the king of the gods to verify that it is not he who is on stage. Then Vives adds a rather strange detail, that among the other actors there were some who swore that this was not man but Jupiter himself, and they paid a harsh penalty for their error. Who could these actors be? Are they the bad angels who fell down to hell because they thought themselves to be more beautiful than Lucifer, or is this a veiled criticism of those philosophers and thinkers who ascribed too much power to man, making him almost a god? The distortion of Pico's sublime concept of man seems deliberate. We do not sense here the mystery of the creation of man, that creature a little less than the angels, who might recognize and contemplate God's handiwork. Later on, Copernicus would share Pico's exalted notion of man, that the heavens were made for his contemplation. Not so Vives. As in his commentary of the dream of Scipio, he rejects the Neoplatonic emphasis on the contemplative and sees man's virtue as expressed in the active life, the *virtus actiosa*, of which Cicero speaks in the *De natura deorum*.¹² There is no trace whatsoever of man's freedom of choice, his exemption from certain fixed laws, as is the case with the rest of creation, the fashioner and molder of his own being. This skilled actor must adhere strictly to the script that has been given him, not to depart from it by a hair's breadth.

¹² Cicero, *De natura deorum*, 1, 110.

The emphasis in *Vives*, as the play goes on, is ethical, not metaphysical, emphasizing *actio*, not *contemplatio*.

As a reward for his convincing performance, man is recalled from the stage and seated among the immortals. He is received not by applause but by silent wonder. *Vives* continues this unusual attribution of wonder to the gods at the spectacle of man as part of the dramatic action, rather than express the wonder evoked by this supreme creation in human terms, as *Pico* does repeatedly. He is then presented before the gods stripped of his mask and mortal body, revealing that part of his nature akin to their own (*Vives* uses the adjective *germana*), which, when covered by the mask and the body, converts him into such a variable, desultory, mutable animal, a polypus and a chameleon, like what they had seen on stage. All these attributes of man, of course, recall the very words used by *Pico*. Then, again in a very original *coup de théâtre*, *Vives* has the gods bestow on *Jupiter* the title of Father of gods and of men, so that from then on he could glory in this double honorific title. The next step in man's apotheosis is for *Mercury* to carry the spoils of all the guises man had assumed in his performance into the midst of the grandstand of the gods. *Exuviae* besides signifying the armor stripped from a defeated enemy or the skin stripped from a dead body, also has the less common connotation of the special attributes of gods carried in possession, which seems to be the meaning intended here. The gods gather round to inspect these spoils and praise the wisdom of *Jupiter* for his skilful creation. It must be said with all honesty that this is very strange stage business indeed. This is *Vives*' way of introducing the conventional praise of man's physical and spiritual qualities, which derives essentially from a section of the second book of *Cicero*'s *De natura deorum*, in which *Balbus* expounds the Stoic notion of the universe. In other treatises on the dignity of man, this aspect receives much more attention, as in *Lactantius*' *De opificio Dei* and *Giannozzo Manetti*'s *De dignitate et excellentia hominis*.

Among man's achievements *Vives* gives great prominence to the invention of language, through which learning can be transmitted, including the knowledge and cult of the gods, which once again demonstrates man's affinity to the gods. *Vives* seems to recall here, more consciously than *Pico*, *Plato*'s myth of creation in the *Protagoras*.¹³ *Plato* specifically alludes there to man's unique privilege to worship the gods, by which he acquires a kinship with them. *Vives* emphasizes also the faculty of memory, without which none of this knowledge could have been preserved. From memory comes a certain ability to predict the future, a

¹³ *Protagoras* 320c-323c.

spark (*scintilla*) of divine prescience. These same qualities, as the distinguishing features of man, are mentioned again in the commentary on the *Dream of Scipio*.

One more honor awaits this versatile creature. He is allowed to partake of the remains of the feast in the company of the gods, is clothed in the purple *praetexta* and goes forth to watch the spectacle. As night falls, he reclines with the gods once more at the evening banquet. In this function he puts back on the mask that he had temporarily laid aside. It too was deemed worthy of the feast since it had served man's purposes so well. It was even given the power of perception so that it might enjoy the eternal bliss of the banquet.

So ends this enigmatic piece. It is in the form of a fable, which according to Macrobius,¹⁴ who, of course, also wrote a commentary of the *Dream of Scipio*, may be of two kinds: one that gives pleasure, and one that exhorts the reader to some good purpose. Vives seems to wish us to believe that it is more of the first type, although, as he said in the dedicatory letter, there is some lesson to be learned from it. Another hint of Vives' intention is given in the second part of the introductory letter to Van Bergen, which speaks of his commentary on the *Georgics*, the companion piece to the fable in its first publication. There he says that it is not absurd for the philosopher to descend sometimes from severe teaching to the more pleasant Muses.¹⁵

Pico prided himself on his knowledge of scholastic philosophy and his ability to speak its specialized language, the *stilus Parisiensis*, which he defended against Hermolao Barbaro in the famous exchange of letters with him. Vives is most emphatically a convinced humanist. His sources are Cicero, Virgil and Lucian, among others. The spirit of his short *jeu d'esprit* owes much to Lucian especially, although it is not in the form of dialogue. The tone is ludic, not satiric. The whole scene is reminiscent of Lucian's *Ecclesia theon*, in which Momus, the arch-critic, examines the credentials of those who seek admission into Olympus, save that Vives reverses his role: rather than expelling this interloper, the gods admit him into their company.

The adoption of a mask by the Archmime is a very telling device. As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote so memorably in his study of Rabelais,¹⁶ the mask is related to transition, metamorphosis, the violation of natural boundaries. It contains the play element of life and lends itself to parody and caricature.

¹⁴ Macrobius, *Commentarius in somnium Scipionis*, 1, 2, 6-11.

¹⁵ Vives, *Opera omnia*, vol. IV, p. 2.

¹⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Helene Iswolsky, (Cambridge, Mass. 1968), pp. 38-39.

Vives disguises man beneath the accoutrements of the mask in his first appearance on the world stage. We must peer beneath it. The actor is not all that he seems to be. By assigning this role to man, Vives is able to present him not as a philosophical abstraction, but as a concrete presence. As would become more evident in his later writings, especially the *De anima et vita*, he was more interested in investigating the secret mechanisms within man that govern his actions. It was not so important to him to know what the soul is as to know what are its functions.

This unpretentious *fabula* has received little scholarly attention until recently. It was included by Professor Kristeller as the tail-end piece of his collection, *Eight Renaissance Philosophers*, terribly translated into English by one of his students.¹⁷ He considered it a mere imitation of Pico, but with due respect for the prodigious erudition of Professor Kristeller, I think perhaps that he did not read this fable very carefully or with sympathetic understanding. In many ways it is just as controversial as Pico's pronouncements, and one might even see this reduction to the stage as an allusive parody of its predecessor. It is a radical *bouleversement* of medieval logic and ontology. Vives has translated the '*distinguo's*' and certitudes of the Scholastics into a compelling theatrical representation with all of its illusions and ambiguities. He does not provide spoken parts, but if he had, it would have been the *sermo communis*, which he will later prescribe as the language of the stage in the *De ratione dicendi*.¹⁸ The young author of the *Fabula de homine* would have been of one accord with the sentiments of the motto that still adorn Shakespeare's Globe Theater in London: 'Totus mundus agit histrionem.'

Rudolph Agricola's speech to the clergy of Worms – Adrie van der Laan

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¹⁷ Juan Luis Vives, 'A Fable about Man', trans. Nancy Lenkeith in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Paul Oskar Kristeller, (Chicago 1948), pp. 385-393.

¹⁸ *De ratione dicendi*, 3,38.