



This book, called *The Life of John Pico, Earl of Mirandola*, seems a simple translation of a biography written about Pico by Pico's heir and admiring nephew, but More makes deliberate changes to the text, often altering its meaning and increasing its complexities. (These changes are indicated by brackets and notes in the text.) The puzzling character of More's first work published in English foreshadows the puzzling character of *Utopia*.

Pico was a brilliant, rich, and famous humanist of Renaissance Italy. By age twenty-three, he had the command of six languages, had studied at the best Italian and French universities, and was famous for his mastery of the "secret knowledge" of the Chaldean, Arabic, and Hebrew cabala. His great ambition was to produce a synthesis of all world philosophies and theologies. At twenty-three, Pico finished the 900 Theses, prefaced by his non-famous "Oration of Man," and he challenged any intellectual in Europe to dispute them with him in Rome. Pico offered to pay anyone's travel expenses to participate. The pope intervened, however, cancelled the event, and Pico had to flee from Rome to avoid arrest. But when he arrived in France, Pico was arrested and imprisoned, and was put on probation once he retracted his book and promised not to discuss it. He would not be absolved of heresy charges until he was thirty, the year before he died of unknown and mysterious causes. None of this is mentioned in More's biography. More also removes references to Pico's embarrassing and even criminal actions. For example, in 1486, on his way to Rome to defend his new book, Pico abducted the wife of a member of the powerful Medici family, was wounded and arrested. But this episode is absent from More's book.

How is the reader to judge Pico's life and character?

1. Is Pico's life, articulated in the biography and Pico's own letters, a model of the principles articulated in the scriptural commentaries and poems on spiritual combat and "The Twelve Properties of a Lover"? What are the major principles articulated in the second half of the work?
2. In More's presentation of Pico's character, what qualities are shown to be admirable and worthy of imitation? Are any qualities presented as blameworthy or a subject of concern?
3. Does the work present Pico's asceticism as well-ordered?
4. Is the biographical account of Pico's spiritual journey straightforward? Are there any details that could be considered ironic?
5. What do you make of the end of the biography, the account of Pico's "forsloughing" and his premature death? Savonarola, the controversial figure who makes the final claims about Pico's death (and life), is unnamed in More's translation. Excommunicated in 1497, Savonarola was burned at the stake by the civil authorities of Florence in 1498. What are we to make of his role in the *Life*, and his judgment of his young pupil and follower, Pico? Are they models for imitation?
6. The prefatory letter describes Pico as "a spectacle of virtue." Considering the work as a whole, what do you think this might mean? What other goals does that prefatory letter suggest for the *Life*? Is More successful?

Why include the "Letter to Corneus" in the *The Life of Pico*?

1. How well does Pico's Letter to Corneus summarize Pico's fundamental principles? How do the principles in this letter compare to the principles suggested in the biography and in the rest of the work, especially the poetry?
2. In the Letter to Corneus, what does Pico argue about the active vs. the contemplative life? How does Pico's thinking compare to the treatment of the same themes in Book 1 of *Utopia*?

What accounts for More's additions and excisions?

In translating and presenting his Pico in English, More makes significant additions to the original Latin *Vita* by Gianfrancesco; he also excises large portions of Gianfrancesco's Latin.

1. Are there any consistent themes addressed through More's additions? Is More shaping the life of Pico in any noticeable way by what he adds to the text?
2. Is there any connection between More's excisions? How does the impression we are given of Pico's life and character change because of More's excisions?
3. Does More's *Life of Pico* present a different character, a different Pico, from the original Latin biography? If so, why do you think More does so?

Rhetoric and Poetic

1. What is the rhetorical strategy of the work? How does it move, challenge, or lead the reader?
2. How does More understand the relation between author and reader? More says he intends the work to help the reader become "godly prosperous" (63/37). What does this mean? What is his strategy for helping the reader in this direction?
3. In the second half of the work, More writes most of the poetry in rhyme royal poetry, usually expanding Pico's one-line prose summaries. Why might More have done so? What is the effect on the reader?
4. In your judgment, which lines on virtue or love are most important for the *Life* as a whole? Which lines connect to earlier issues in the work most powerfully?