INTRODUCTION

MUST WE REALLY RE-APPROPRIATE MAGIC?

During the Renaissance the whole idea of nature changed—of its infinity and its limits, of man’s dominion over the physical world both vegetables and animals, of the regularity of physical and biological phenomena. In short, what changed was man’s idea of nature’s laws. But it was the time of the demonology of those inquisitors who organized large-scale burnings of witches and who, after the Council of Trent, put on spectacular shows of exorcism of those considered possessed by demons; nor did they fail to keep a strict watch on everything written or said on these matters by philosophers.

This book will explore certain philosophical theories which provided an interpretation of these ideas of nature, of its laws and exceptions and, lastly, of man’s capacity to dominate the cosmos.

It is usual for studies of this sort to concentrate on the Hermetic and Neoplatonic philosophers, or on the relationship between magic and the scientific revolution—all with good reason. I shall not, however, concentrate on these aspects but rather upon the interference of astrology and magic with alternative rites and also with witchcraft, which in the Renaissance period was an important question for social and religious history. Above all I shall concentrate on the definitions of magic provided and discussed by certain heretics and “wandering scholastics”.1

At the beginning of the fifteenth century teaching the philosophy of nature was a matter of presenting and interpreting the *Physics* and other natural-philosophical works of Aristotle; at the end of the sixteenth century one of the professors of philosophy appointed at Rome’s university, La Sapienza, was the Neoplatonist, Francesco Patrizi da Cherso. There had been some antecedents early in the century: Leonico Tomeo in Padua and Francesco Cattani da Diacceto in Pisa, both of whom were disciples of Ficino. In their official teaching they were obliged to read out the works of Aristotle, but in their personal writings they discussed

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1 See this definition *infra* II/1, note 1.
Neoplatonic and Hermetic problems just as their master and model had done. In the course of these two centuries—when Ficino’s translations made it possible to read the whole of Plato, Corpus Hermeticum, Plotinus, Porphyry, Jamblichus, Proclus, Psellus and others—much had changed in philosophy, particularly in natural philosophy.

Nor was this all, for the period saw many other fundamental changes. The philological method elaborated by Lorenzo Valla, Politian and Erasmus made it possible to date and compare rediscovered texts and thus to read them in a new light. Agricola and Ramus devised a new inventive method; followers of Lull developed the art of classification and combination as well as the encyclopedia; Copernicus, Tycho Brahe, Kepler and Galileo proposed new methods for measuring the movements of celestial bodies; Vesalius reformed anatomy; Servetus, Realdus Columbus, Caesalpinus and Harvey discovered the double circulation of the blood; Lucretius’ work discovered in the fifteenth century suggested an atomistic conception of matter and corroborated the idea of the infinity of worlds.

Thanks to Ficino’s De amore and De vita coelitus comparanda and to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s Apologia for his Conclusiones nongentae (Nine hundred theses), by the end of the fifteenth century the theory of “natural magic” had become much discussed in high-cultural circles.

Working on a basis of Neoplatonism, Orphism and Hermetism, the two philosophers had reintroduced the traditional astrological theory of the correspondences between celestial bodies and “elementated” bodies, combining this with Avicenna’s theory of the power of the imagination and the Stoic-Neoplatonic idea of “spiritus”—thus Ficino, Pico and many others maintained that the power of magic was independent of the invocation of spirits.

Ficino and Pico had brought to light a number of ideas that were already to be found in patristic and scholastic times, but had received limited attention from professional philosophers. From the end of the fifteenth century these had become dominant among the elites and soon spread abroad among academic and literary circles. The Neoplatonic and Hermetic theories of the two Florentines on the cosmos, the “spirit” and the forces of nature had given rise to a new idea of magic.

In those same years, between the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries, another who failed to believe this was Lefèvre d’Etaples, the great Parisian editor of humanist translations of the ancient philosophers of every school, who later joined the evangelical church and whose attitude