PART I

GENERAL TENDENCIES
Viewed with modern eyes, premodern texts are strange. They often appear as disordered, repetitious, and fragmentary, and seem to suffer from lack of integrity, cohesion, and over-all organization. For the reader who approaches them with modern textual assumptions, there is often something awkward or absent-minded about them. They are, for want of a more precise term, heterogeneous. Of course, this statement needs qualification, since not all premodern texts are loosely organised, disjointed, or porous. Dante’s *Divina commedia* and *De monarchia* and Thomas Aquinas’s *Summa theologica*, for example, most definitely do not fall into this category. Neither does most of Petrarch’s poetry or Boccaccio’s *Decamerone*. So perhaps it would be more correct to say that it is certain medieval literature and premodern humanist texts, and texts of humanist inspiration, that from a formal point of view appear odd or perplexing to modern readers. Part of this strangeness is undoubtably due to the specific character of manuscript culture, which, as we know, only gradually evolved in the course of the second half of the fifteenth and the sixteenth century into print culture. However, yet again, this explanation is contradicted by the perfection of form and the clear and explicit structure of Dante and Aquinas. So, while the phenomenon that I want to investigate here might have something to do with the conventions of manuscript production and circulation, its ramifications are much wider and more complicated.

Previous generations of Renaissance scholars were able to intuit the fundamental otherness of humanist literature, such as Hans Baron, Felix Gilbert, and J.H. Hexter in particular. Finding the works of Leonardo Bruni, Machiavelli, and Thomas More contradictory, assembled and loosely organised, they proceeded to break them down into parts or portions, which they then went on to date differently by situating them in biographical and historical contexts. In Baron’s case, this meant the redating of Leonardo Bruni’s writings in relation to the mythical year of 1402, when the Florentines had been miraculously saved from falling