AFTERWORD:
THE CHANGING CONTOURS OF EARLY MODERN
INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

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When Michael Heyd began his studies for a Ph.D. at Princeton University in 1970, the major questions that absorbed scholars in the field of early modern European intellectual history had been familiar for at least three decades, and in some cases went back more than a century, to the world of Jacob Burckhardt and Leslie Stephen.¹ What had the great literary and philosophical figures of the past thought? How had they interacted, whether as disciples, controversialists, or shapers of subject matter? How had they responded to their times and, in turn, affected their contemporaries or successors? What were the different forms of creativity, especially the written and the artistic, and how did they relate to one another? These and a few adjacent issues formed the principal concerns of the scholarship that had established the subdiscipline.

The one major new interest, and it was to become crucial to anyone entering the field in 1970, was the history of science. From early stirrings in the 1930s, the story of the scientific revolution had begun to capture attention in the years following World War II, and by 1970 was not only an essential object of study for anyone interested in early modern intellectual history, but was also helping to define the chronology of the period.² Little could anyone at the time have realized that this was but the first of the transformations that were to overwhelm the field in the next forty years.

The next development came very quickly: Keith Thomas’s powerful demonstration that the traditional history of religion, focused on doctrine and the detailed examination of texts, had to be expanded to include what often had been regarded as superstition—belief in witches, in magic, and in a wide range of other-worldly phenomena. Interestingly enough, this

shift of emphasis connected with one of the newer streams in the history of science, which itself was beginning to move away from the magisterial story of great discoveries into the penumbra of ideas about nature, including speculation about magic and the occult. What both of these reorientations heralded was a change in direction for intellectual history. Alongside the standard explorations of the outlooks of major authors and the literate classes that read their works, there was now growing attention, both to topics such as magic which did not normally appear in this context, and also to the nonliterate people whose beliefs had tended to be excluded from the story. And this quest to understand the attitudes of entire societies was receiving a major stimulus, at this very time, from a new initiative in French scholarship.

The historiography of early modern Europe in France had been dominated for decades by the *Annales* school in Paris. Its commitment had been to social history, and its leading exponents—Fernand Braudel, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, and Pierre Goubert—had been pioneers in what they called “histoire totale”; that is, the effort to comprehend a society in its totality, from the topography of its surroundings to the diet of its peasants. Around 1970, however, there appeared a new interest in the “histoire des mentalités,” the history of the mental world of the past. Two non-*Annales* writers, in particular, were to have a broad influence in bringing new subjects to the fore: Philippe Ariès and Michel Foucault. Their investigations of attitudes toward childhood, death, madness, and discipline widened the boundaries of the field enormously, and helped to create interactions between social and intellectual history that were to benefit both specialties.

It was largely because of French influence, however, that there also arose in these years an interest in forms of analysis that, by and large, diverted scholars from the basic enterprise of intellectual history. What was involved was a cluster of enterprises that took their cue from theoretical premises, rather than from problems inherent in the evidence or

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4 The speed with which this changing landscape was recognized is indicated by the appearance, already in 1978, of a wide-ranging survey; see Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978).