During the last decades, the history of early modern botany has become one of the most popular research subjects of science historians. Several scholars, including Alain Touwaide, Claudia Swan, Brian W. Ogilvie
and Marie-Elisabeth Boutroue⁴ have devoted their attention to the rich literature of early modern herbals, the perception of the plant world transmitted by early modern botanists and scientists and the role played by botany in university curricula and erudite culture. Authors of herbals such as Leonard Fuchs and Carolus Clusius, commentators on ancient herbals (above all Dioscorides’ *De materia medica*) such as Pietro Andrea Mattioli and Andrés Laguna, and scholars and erudite thinkers such as Ermolao Barbaro and Niccolò Leoniceno have attracted the researchers’ interest and encouraged in-depth studies.⁵

In this essay I cannot and will not rewrite the history of research on early modern botany. Rather, I would like to focus on a specific feature, the role played by botany in early modern encyclopaedic culture. In fact, several scholars have stressed the encyclopaedic character of early modern botanical works and herbals. Ogilvie has emphasised, for example, the constant growth in the number of described plants between 1530 and 1623, the latter being the year when Caspar Bauhin’s mammoth herbal, covering more than six thousand species, was published.⁶ The reasons for the ‘encyclopaedic attitude’ towards plants in the early modern age may be traced back to the need to put at the readers’ disposal the rich cultural

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