CHAPTER THREE

THE RETURN TO PTOLEMY

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The cultural renewal that characterized the Renaissance period could hardly fail to involve the field of astrological studies; and indeed we may discern a twofold movement: a turn away from medieval traditions on the one hand, and on the other, a direct confrontation with the lessons of the Classical writers on the topic, especially with the greatest among them, Claudius Ptolemy. What came out of this was a profoundly different version of astrology with respect to that of the Latin Middle Ages, especially in regard to the philosophical implications. The new version showed a marked departure from the Arabic literature, which, translated into Latin, had greatly influenced the medieval form of Western astrology and the associated debates. Its proponents purported to purify astrological studies of what they termed the “nugae arabum,” the trifles of the Arabs, and vigorously opposed the heretical and magical interpretations of astrology, inherited from the late Middle Ages, and thus a whole new area of astrological studies was born.1

The elements of continuity that have characterised astrology since its origins, especially in respect to technique, coexisted in the Renaissance with new features, so that this period became one of the great turning points in the long history of the art. The fundamental procedures, originating within Babylonian culture many centuries before Christ, were codified in Greek and Hellenistic times in forms that to a large extent would resist the passage of time. Once they received their structure, they continued to be transmitted across the centuries, largely unchanged. They thus became the nucleus of a tradition through which they travelled, from one phase to another, one circle to another, one author to another; hence the strong repetitiveness of most astrology handbooks. Such handbooks often

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1 On the distinction between astrology and magic see O. Pompeo Faracovi, Gli astrologi e la magia, in La magia nell’Europa moderna. Tra antica sapienza e filosofia naturale, a cura di F. Meroi, con la collaborazione di E. Scapparone (Florence: Olschki, 2007), vol. I, pp. 147–163.
take the form of a compilation designed to transmit the codified body of knowledge with minimal variations. Only a few great treatises, in different times and contexts, provided some re-elaborations and critical re-examination. The first among these is certainly one of the most important: namely, the *Tetrabiblos* by Claudius Ptolemy, written around the middle of the 2nd century AD. Amid the continuity of the astrological tradition there were breaks and shifts marking clearly identifiable phases and tendencies. At such times the significance of astrology was re-examined and redefined, new procedures were added to the classical techniques, while the basic procedures emphasised different aspects of the tradition. Consolidated approaches lost their age-long centrality, while attention came to be drawn to aspects previously considered as mere details. Another of these moments of renewal began between the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, at a time when the dominant trends of the Middle Ages came to be viewed critically and selectively. These trends derived from the Latin translations of Arabic texts, composed between the 11th and 12th centuries, as well as from the rediscovery, during that time, of the last astrology handbook of the late Latin period, the *Mathesis* by Firmicus Maternus, written in the 4th century. In the Arabic treatises, an essential source for the Latin Middle Ages, the procedures of individual and general astrology had come to be part of a common language in which there co-existed suggestions of various and sundry origins, Hellenic-Babylonian, Persian, Indian, Hebrew, Hermetic and Harranian, while a form of convergence emerged between astrological techniques on the one hand, and magical and divinatory influences on the other. In the West, the Latin versions of the Arabic texts triggered a great interest in this art, which came to be understood as a *scientia media*, an organic component of a comprehensive vision of the world, rapidly integrated into the curricula of university, as a component part of studies of astronomy and medicine. The texts gave rise at the same time to complex operations of selection going beyond the limits of natural philosophy and involving the distinction between one form of astrology and another, attempting to avoid pretensions of infallibility in predictions and to restrict the Hermetically-inspired magical practices.