MAGIC IN WESTERN CULTURE

The story of the beliefs and practices called ‘magic’ starts in ancient Iran, Greece, and Rome, before entering its crucial Christian phase in the Middle Ages. Centering on the Renaissance and Marsilio Ficino – whose work on magic was the most influential account written in pre-modern times – this groundbreaking book treats magic as a classical tradition with foundations that were distinctly philosophical. Besides Ficino, the pre-modern story of magic also features Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Aquinas, Agrippa, Pomponazzi, Porta, Bruno, Campanella, Descartes, Boyle, Leibniz, and Newton, to name only a few of the prominent thinkers discussed. Because pictures play a key role in the story of magic, the book is richly illustrated.

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MAGIC IN WESTERN CULTURE
FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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A MJBA,
IL MAGO MIGLIORE,
DA BPC,
UN APPRENDISTA
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Research for this book started in 1967, when I chose Symphorien Champier as the subject of my dissertation, which eventually became Copenhaver (1978a): see the bibliography. Over the next forty years or so, I continued to read and write about the ‘occultist tradition’ mentioned in the title of that book, while changing my views about it. The results can be seen in Copenhaver (1978b), (1984), (1986), (1987a), (1987b), (1988), (1990), (1991), (1992a), (1992b), (1992c), (1993), (1994), (1998), (2000a), (2000b), (2006), (2007c), (2009a), (2010a) and (2010b). All of this has been re-examined, corrected, revised, synthesized, and reorganized to form the core of this book, augmented by completely new material and up-to-date documentation. Because of their narrower content and specialized form, the studies preliminary to this book could not, one by one, sustain its larger claims, which address this question: why did European intellectuals – philosophers especially – repudiate magic in the Enlightenment, after having previously accepted it for more than two millennia?

Mega biblion, mega kakon: an even bigger nuisance, however, would have come from my original plan to include Giovanni Pico’s Kabbalah and make the story more complete – though much too long. For now, see Copenhaver (1977), (1980), (1999), (2002a), (2002b), (2007a), (2007a), (2007b), (2011) and (2012). Preparing a companion volume – Magic and the Dignity of Man: Pico’s Oration in Cultural Memory – constantly reminds me that Pico and Kabbalah, whose place in the current book is small, deserve much larger attention.

Meanwhile, I hope that this book has some virtues of its defects – its scope especially. Since I begin with rumors of a murder in ancient Greece and end with a real murder in today’s India, my story can only be selective and episodic, but macro-stories need telling as much as
PREFACE

micro-stories. On the topics discussed, I have tried to be responsive to current scholarship, though not always at the same depth, relying on secondary literature more for some topics than for most: on J. G. Frazer’s career, for example, I have not gone far beyond Ackerman’s excellent book; likewise for Hanegraaff on Lazzarelli, Perrone Compagni on Pomponazzi, Sturlese on Bruno’s De umbris, Kahn on the French Rosicrucians, and Newman and Principe on alchemy in England. Also, having read some of the primary texts long before the best current editions were available, I have not always adapted my citations to the new versions: this is true for Bacon and Boyle, for example.

Translations from Greek, Latin, and vernacular languages are mine unless otherwise indicated. Many of the images used in this book are taken from other books, most of them published long ago. Otherwise, for images that require permissions, I am grateful to the British Museum; British Library; Bibliothèque National de France; Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford; Warburg Institute; J. Paul Getty Museum; Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana; Biblioteca dell’Accademia dei Lincei; Mary Evans Picture Library; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague; University of Oslo Library; Museo dell’Opera Metropolitana, Siena; Museo Nazionale Romano, Terme; Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna; Art Institute of Chicago; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

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