

PREFACE

The essays collected in this volume discuss forms of learned response to the natural world in fourteenth- to early-seventeenth-century Europe. Its title and subtitle reflect our continuing conviction that one cannot study the history of understanding of nature in this period without mastering the learned disciplines of the time, however alien these may now seem. The subtitle also evidently reveals that we think there is a valid use for the term “Renaissance” in this context (not that we would dispute the broader merits of “early modern” as a chronological or social history category). In the learned disciplines treated here, the classical heritage always played a central role, whether it was being defended or attacked, preserved or revised, and whether those doing so were humanists or scholastics. By focusing on questions of revival, transmission, and appropriation, we treat our protagonists from a standpoint that they themselves might accept as legitimate, while recognizing both the traditional and the innovative qualities of their work. In this heuristic sense, at least, we feel certain that both the term and the notion of the Renaissance retain their validity.

We would like to acknowledge the help of many friends and colleagues, without whom this volume would not have been possible. The genesis of the collection was the workshop on “Renaissance Natural Philosophy and the Disciplines,” held at the Dibner Institute for the History of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on 5–6 May 1995. Jed Buchwald and Evelyn Simha of the Dibner Institute invited us to organize a meeting on this theme, and carried out all the necessary technical preparations for it with miraculous speed and efficiency, leaving us to enjoy some memorable exchanges of ideas in peace and comfort. We are also grateful to Jed Buchwald, in his capacity as general editor of the Dibner Series in the History of Science and Technology, for arranging for the publication of these essays, which represent revised and enlarged forms of the papers presented at the workshop. Our greatest debt is, of course, to our authors, who have borne patiently with our requests for revisions and with various

delays. Special thanks to Katharine Park, who graciously allowed us to use her title for the collection as a whole. Thanks are also due, finally, to the anonymous referees who read the volume for the press, to Matthew Abbate and Larry Cohen of the MIT Press for their help, and to Alice Falk for exceptionally careful and thoughtful copyediting.

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