

The Faustian Century.
German Literature and Culture in the Age of Luther and
Faustus.

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1. Faust has appeared in many guises: as the central figure in an anonymous novelistic book entitled *Historia von D. Johann Fausten dem weitbeschreyten Zauberer vund Schwarzkünstler* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Johann Spies, 1587), translated into English by P.F. as *The historie of the damnable life, and deserued death of Doctor Iohn Faustus* (1588, although the earliest extant copy is dated 1592); in Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragicall History of D. Faustus* (first performed in 1589 but not published until 1604); in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust. Eine Tragödie* (1808, 1832); and in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus* (1947). Indeed, as Kresten Thue Andersen notes, 'numerous poets, composers, artists, writers, and filmmakers have drawn on Faustian inspiration' (p. 193 n. 2). The essays in this collection, however, are concerned not only with Faust as a literary creation but with his historical prototype and precursors, with the wider milieu in which the influential 1587 chapbook was conceived, disseminated and interpreted – what the editors, both distinguished Professors of German at Illinois State University, have dubbed 'The Faustian Century'; the age of Renaissance humanism, the Magisterial Reformation *and* Faust (pp. 1, 17, 32). Unquestionably that is the strength of this volume; the marriage of context with textual analysis.

2. In the first of his two contributions, 'The German Faustian Century', Andrew Weeks suggests that during the course of the sixteenth century the 'finest vernacular literature of the Renaissance blossomed all across Europe', everywhere that is 'except in the sprawling German lands at the heart of Europe'. Despite what today sounds like 'vulgar nationalism', the cornucopia represented by Machiavelli, Tasso, Góngora, Cervantes, Rabelais, Camões, Montaigne, Sidney, Marlowe and Shakespeare (to name just a few) must be set against dearth: the anonymous and 'reputedly artless' *Faustbuch* (1587), a hastily and carelessly compiled narrative heavily dependent upon the Bible and theology for its principal 'themes and sources', which also 'shunned humanistic literary refinements' (pp. 18–19, 142). Accordingly, in Marguerite de Huszar Allen's assessment, the result was no potential masterpiece but merely 'a flawed but successful literary formula of the late sixteenth century, a best seller that created a new archetypal plot and hero' (pp. 170, 171).

3. Context is of course crucial and here rightly provided in abundance. Against the backdrop of the Lutheran Reformation, which began at Wittenberg – likewise birthplace of the 'Faustian myth' (p. 50) – the Lutheran statement of faith promulgated through the Augsburg Confession of 1530 (pp. 177–97), not to mention 'internecine Protestant quarrels' between Gnesio Lutherans and Philippists (pp. 55,

216–17), the reader is thus invited to think of Faust alongside certain sixteenth-century reformers. The Nuremberg pastor Andreas Osiander, for example, who oversaw publication of a collection of alchemical works (1541) as well as Nicolaus Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (1543), who was defamed by a Catholic polemicist as 'a Jew, a black devil, a dragon, a nefarious man' and an 'enemy of Christ', and whose 'legend tellingly resembles that of Dr. Faustus' (pp. 18, 25–26). Then there is Luther himself, a former Augustinian monk doubtless familiar with Augustine of Hippo's condemnation of Faustus the Manichaean, whose recorded table talk, according to Frank Baron, 'transformed the Faustus image into a wicked magician in league with the devil' (pp. 50, 129). Suggestively, Luther remarked on pacts with the devil as did his Wittenberg colleague, the humanist Philipp Melanchthon, who was said by one of his students to have actually known a man named Faustus (pp. 51, 180–82).

4. A further layer concerns the gulf between faith and reason, the emergence of classically informed scepticism, and the conflict between ecclesiastical authority and purported secret knowledge. Situated within a climate of anticlericalism and Lutheran hostility toward superstition (the *Faustbuch's* depiction of the devil in a Franciscan habit even inspired a 1608 English engraving which visually combined these two tendencies by portraying Mephistopheles as a monk), the text must therefore be appreciated in light of Nicholas of Cusa's *De docta ignorantia*; Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (*Ship of Fools*); Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*; Agrippa's *De incertitudine et vanitate scientiarum*; and Montaigne's *Essais*. Viewed this way, Faust becomes a lesson on the folly of human learning writ large, a warning to young students and others who arrogantly dare to know more than is permitted.

5. Another context still is the world of magical incantations and grimoires (pp. 11, 126–27, 243–46), diabolic pacts, witches, monstrous births, alchemical experimentation (pp. 246–50), astrological portents (pp. 250–51), dream interpretations, celestial signs and apocalyptic speculation (pp. 28–31). Here Faust's significant forerunners are identified as Johannes Trithemius, Cornelius Agrippa and Paracelsus; all three figures the subjects of excellent essays by Michael Keefer and Urs Leo Gantenbein respectively (pp. 67–91, 93–123). Yet 'the devil is not merely in the details' (p. 20). As God's adversary and humanity's enemy his appearance had eschatological import. And as Faust's false teacher he is deservedly the subject of Albrecht Classen's wide-ranging and instructive chapter on his presence and absence in the early modern world, and sixteenth-century German literature in particular (pp. 257–83). The Devil, moreover, was a deceptive tempter, with those of a melancholic disposition believed to be most susceptible to his wiles. Among the most notable was the so-called Teutonic Philosopher, Jacob Böhme, whose own dark night of the soul in the shape of an encounter with 'Schwarz-Hans' is discussed by Günther Bonheim; after all, 'why do so many of the guilty go unpunished, when the innocent suffer?' (p. 296). Then there were the Devil's instruments, including witches. For this was also the age of Heinrich Kramer's and Jacob Sprenger's notorious *Malleus maleficarum* [*Hammer of Witches*] (1486), of Johannes Wier's *De praestigiis daemonum et incantationibus* (Basel: Johannes Oporinus, 1563), and the widespread execution of suspected witches. Indeed, Frank Baron thinks that 'the author of the Faust Book adapted,

manipulated, and expanded a work that was primarily devoted to the persecution of witches' (p. 54). Witches were accused of many dreadful sins which were typically imagined as inversions of idealised behaviour. While revealing much about contemporary fears it is noteworthy that one of their imagined diabolically motivated crimes was cannibalism. There were, however, actual cannibals discovered by European adventurers on the New World, prompting an essay by Montaigne and a chapter on 'Faust and the Cannibals'. Here Karl Guthke attempts to account both for America's absence from the *Faustbuch* and its presence in the anonymous *Wagnerbuch* (1593), which subsequently developed the Faust story (pp. 305–35).

6. What then of Faust himself, whose name, meaning fist in German, most likely derives from the Latin noun for favourer or promoter? Of the historical person, or perhaps personages, we know frustratingly little. The fragments have been painstakingly assembled by Baron. Even so, his contention that one Georg Helmstetter (born c.1466) of Helmstadt near Heidelberg is the same man as 'Magister Georgius Sabellicus, Faustus iunior' referred to in a letter by Trithemius (1507), *and* is to be identified with the 'Doctor Faustus' casting a horoscope for the Bishop of Bamberg (1520), the soothsayer 'Dr Jörg Faustus von Heidelberg' expelled from Ingolstadt (1528) and the 'great sodomite and necromancer' 'Doctor fausto' denied safe conduct through Nuremberg (1532), has not found universal acceptance – even among contributors to this volume (cf. pp. 13, 129–31, 267). After all, this was an age of aliases and pseudonyms: thus an English trickster's manual of 1634 was entitled *Hocus Pocus junior*, while Paracelsus was the name adopted by Theophrastus of Hohenheim. So it may be that, like the medieval English outlaws who each went under the nickname 'Robert the Hood' (Robin Hood), we are dealing with the conflation several obscure historical figures.

7. When it comes to particular aspects of the Faust legend, however, we are on surer ground as to their roots. Hence several contributors remark on the diabolic pact as a feature of certain saints' lives; examples include St. Basil and some stories recounted in Jacobus de Voragine's collection *Legenda Aurea* (c.1260). The *Faustbuch's* post-Reformation twist is that its protagonist does not avoid eternal damnation through repentance and instead suffers a horrible death: the just punishment of sinners – especially those doubting the reality of hell's torments. This harsh lesson reinforces the anti-Catholic message embedded within the text. One comedic episode sees Faust disguised as the Pope indulging his lust in the sultan's harem in Constantinople. It proves a masterly performance by this 'well-hung' unwed man (pp. 137–38), who later conjures the beautiful Helen of Troy for his concubine – sexual exploits examined by Paul Ernst Meyer in his chapter on marriage in the *Faustbuch* (pp. 200, 210–11). As for the 24 year duration of Faust's bargain with Mephistopheles, each year may correspond to the number of hours in a day suggesting a narrative device intended to complement Faust's astrological knowledge.

8. Given the enduring appeal of Marlowe's *Faustus* a chapter dealing with Elizabethan England, perhaps focused on John Dee, would have been welcome. That of course would have necessitated extending this volume's scope to 'The European Faustian Century' and I appreciate that various constraints might have made this impracticable. More reasonable, perhaps, was a wish to read a piece on visual

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representations of Faust— this because of, rather than despite, the wonderful illustrations prefacing each essay (a colour reproduction of Faust dining at an inn also adorns the front-cover). But these are minor quibbles. Instead, the editors should be congratulated for assembling a fine and cohesive collection which forms not only a welcome but essential addition to the extensive scholarly literature on Faust and his world.