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THE FAUST BOOK'S INDEBTEDNESS TO AUGUSTIN LERCHEIMER AND WITTENBERG SOURCES

The Faust Book, originally entitled the Historia von D. Johann Fausten and published by Johann Spies in 1587, has been, directly or indirectly, the catalyst for the entire European Faust tradition in literature. Its instant popularity and its ability to inspire serious literary endeavors have made it the object of many scholarly investigations. Despite these efforts, the elementary questions of when, how, and why this anonymous book was written still await definitive answers. The background of this book remains a mystery.

When Gustav Milchsack discovered a hitherto unknown version of the Historia, the so-called Wolfenbüttel manuscript, it appeared that some answers were within reach. A key factor in the attempts to understand the origins of the Faust Book was Milchsack's interpretation of Augustin Lercheimer's Christlich bedencken und ernennung von Zauberey, a book published in 1585. The striking similarities between this work (henceforth: Bedencken) and the Faust Book (henceforth: Historia) suggested to Milchsack that Lercheimer had access to an early, lost form of the Faust story. He believed that the original book existed as early as about 1575. As a result, Milchsack argued that Lercheimer was not a factor in the evolution of the Faust story before its publication in 1587. Robert Petsch took up this question once again and in effect accepted Milchsack's argument that Lercheimer's work should not be considered as an influence on the Historia. It is not surprising, therefore, that most recent editions have tended to ignore Lercheimer.¹ But since the assumptions on which the present

¹ There has been a lot of speculation about the origins of the Faust Book. Different dates have been proposed: Gustav Milchsack estimated 1575; Robert Petsch, 1576-1579; Harry Haile, 1580; Hans Henning, 1582-1585. Gustav Milchsack: Historia Johannis Fausti des Zauberers nach der
scholarly assessment rests are highly speculative, a reexamination of Milchsack’s influential thesis is justified. I believe that Milchsack’s rejection of Lercheimer’s *Bedencken* as a source was a mistake and that it has seriously impeded efforts to understand the origins of the *Historia*. It is necessary to repair the damage caused by the neglect of Lercheimer’s *Bedencken*, especially in the form of the rare original edition of 1585.

Scholars have generally not investigated all of Lercheimer’s references to Faust, and they have not been able to show convincingly how these references relate to their sources, contexts, and, most importantly, to the *Historia*.

Lercheimer’s book deals with diabolic magic, and it is dominated by the author’s concern about the persecution of witches. The book appeared in Heidelberg, where the author was a professor of classical languages and literature as well as “mathematics” (i.e., astronomy). Lercheimer’s name changes have been a source of confusion: At the University of Heidelberg and even earlier (since about 1552) he was known under the name of

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