WHO WAS THE HISTORICAL FAUSTUS?
Interpreting an Overlooked Source

In previous studies on the historical Doctor Faustus I presented the thesis that the few existing early sources about Faustus suggest that his real name was distorted in later reports circulated from Wittenberg, primarily by Melanchthon's student Johannes Manlius, and that subsequent historical studies suffered under the influence of these distortions.1 The relatively minor transformation of a name has caused confusion and frustration in attempts to make sense of the early history of the Faust legend. Because the name and image of Faustus as a diabolical magician in Wittenberg represent a relatively late stage in legend formation (two to three decades after Faustus's death), the challenging task has been to make plausible distinctions between the historical person and the legend that he inspired.

I suggested that we need to take a much more careful look at those sources that are not contaminated by the speculations and doctrinal prejudices of persons who probably never saw Faustus but used him anyway as evidence for their views on diabolical magic. Unfortunately, sources are few in number and scant in information. Nevertheless, there are enough reliable documents to supply us with solid data about the name, education, and occupations of the historical figure behind the legend.

August 20, 1507 — Johannes Trithemius: “Magister Georgius Sabellicus Faustus junior”

October 3, 1513 — Conrad Mutianus Rufus: “Georgius Faustus Helmthius Heldelbergensis”

February 12, 1520 — Hans Müller for the Bishop of Bamberg: “Doctor Faustus philosoph[us]”

June 17, 1528 — A scribe of the city of Ingolstadt: “Doctor Jörg Faustus von Haidberg”

July 1528 — Kilian Leib: “Georgius Faustus Helmstet[ensis]”

May 10, 1532 — Hieronymus Holzschuher: “Doctor Faust[us]”

August 13, 1536 — Joachim Camerarius: “Faustus”

January 15, 1540 — Philipp von Hutten: “Philosophus Faustus”


2. Baron: Doctor Faustus, p. 13 and Baron: Faustus, p. 16. The designation of Helmthius in the letter of Mutianus may be a distortion of some form of Helstetter.
I. Doctor patre Suithos fili Nicolae
Ellenberg. S. P. D.

... necesse est prius, minus linguas fuerit
ipse primum effluxus a te amplius, sicque
a Benedicio sapientia, sed si nos a Guardianius.

Quod ad me sperabas 1539, a guardianio non
refusa, vel audita, hisen, qui nunc tu mihi
dedam, ramanent, et nullas ab utis requiris, haec
fuit in. Quia idem guardianium in sua colligimento
debet ad aditum, nam abit, dixit et auro
directionis me proprio subtiliter, ut mihi de rebus
unius mundi, ut iste meus, meus desideratissimi
anterior visitatione, ut observet in prae sedimento
oratione dominus pullus, Spongler, quia habitam
ad Maximilianum summumque regem, commiserisse
nemo amicis, Haridberg, sine tibi meta-motte, vide
omnia, et in omnibus mea, i. e. Georgii
Helmshottel ex indicio aeglogiae, perscrutando
et rhymatorum artem, mihi profini. Patiens
vero solutum habemus missa, interea venale repente
no potest, quod sit regia omnia unidi se efficis
habebis ad me, quod est mea patria. Vale exem-
plus quis religiosis, disciplinis, et visitis. Et tunc
minimale mea sylva osa. In Campusano
septima die octobris ann. 1539

II. Servus Nicolae Ellenberg. S. P. D.
puero Suithos S. P. D. 73

iterum, mihi beneque redditas.