Rembrandt’s Faust Etching, a Socinian document, and the iconography of the inspired scholar

There is probably no etching by Rembrandt which has given rise to such flights of imagination in interpretation as the so-called Faust. Ludwig Münz, The Etchings of Rembrandt, London 1952.

One of the difficulties involved in adding a new view to the long series of interpretations of Rembrandt’s Faust etching, extending over almost three hundred years, is that the author cannot confine himself to putting forward his own ideas but must also summarize those of his predecessors. These can, roughly speaking, be divided into two groups:

1. Those who draw a connection between the print’s traditional name, ‘Dr. Faustus’, and the Faust legend.
2. Those who reject this name as misleading.

I hope to be able to show in this article that in all probability neither opinion is correct. (For a chronological survey of the various theories, the reader is referred to Appendix I, p. 45).

To list the facts first: the print is undated, unsigned, and no known copy bears any inscription. The attribution to Rembrandt has nonetheless never been questioned, and the generally accepted date is fixed around 1650 to 1653. The complications begin with the question of what this print actually represents. We will therefore give a brief prefatory description (Fig. facing this page):

In a room beside a window, a man whose dress shows him to be a scholar stands between a chair and a writing table. On the table a reading-stand and a few books, to the right a globe.

The man holds a pen in his right hand, leans with his right hand on the table, his left hand on the chair; he looks thoughtfully and with no sign of fright in the direction of a complex phenomenon in the window.

This phenomenon consists of four parts:

1) parallel with the window a shining disk containing in its centre the monogram of Christ, INRI, surrounded by two concentric rings with the following inscription:
   + ADAM + TΣ + DAGERAM
   + AMRTET + ALGAR + ALGASTNA + +
2) almost perpendicular to the window, a round mirror;
3) an upper arm, lower arm, hand, and a finger pointing in the direction of the mirror;
4) behind the mirror a vague, almost obliterated, anthropomorphic shape, partly covering the window-frame.

Further, hanging by the window, a bundle of folded papers and,—more to the left—among a few other items, a set of shelves on the wall containing a skull and some books.

The print was copied by Watelet (see C. L. Stieglitz in Historisches Taschenbuch, hrsg. von Fr. v. Raumer V, 1834) and Lips (see note 6).