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Paper citation:

"Who Was the Historical Faustus? Interpreting an Overlooked Source," *Daphnis* 18 (1989), 297-302.

Text of paper:

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.ⁱ 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 iunior"
- October 3, 1513 - Conrad Mutianus Rufus: "Georgius Faustus Helmithius Hedelbergensis"
- February 12, 1520 - Hans Muller for the Bishop of Bamberg: "Doctor Faustus philosoph[us]"
- June 17, 1528 - A scribe of the city of Ingolstadt: "Doctor Jorg Faustus von Haidlberg"
- 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"ⁱⁱ

From this information, which is taken from city and church records as well as from the correspondence of contemporaries, the name Georg Faustus emerges clearly. Faustus came from Helmstadt, a village situated a few miles from Heidelberg. He attained a surprising level and scope of education; he asserted that he had obtained master's degree in philosophy, the highest degree in that field. This may explain why he called himself doctor. Records of the University of Heidelberg reveal that Georg Helmstetter enrolled at the university on January 9, 1483, and obtained his bachelor's degree a year later and his master's degree on March 1, 1487.ⁱⁱⁱ Helmstetter did not use the name Faustus at the University of Heidelberg. It was probably not his

original name; he could have adopted it under the influence of a popular trend among humanists to use Latin or Greek names.

Ideally, what is needed is evidence that would corroborate the thesis that Helmstetter and Faustus were indeed the same person. Furthermore, the contention that Helmstetter was Faustus creates a mysterious period of about seventeen years in which nothing is known about his activities: What was this Helmstetter doing until Trithemius took note of him in 1507? These unanswered questions have favored the survival of the traditional view that Faustus hailed from Knittlingen, where an attractive museum has been established on the basis of that tradition.^{iv}

A manuscript in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris sheds new light on these questions. It contains an exchange of letters about Georg Helmstetter from the University of Heideiberg and about his activities as an astrologer, physiognomist, and chiromantist, occupations in which the historical Doctor Faustus claimed to be an expert.

On October 7, 1534, Dr. Petrus Seuter [also Suter and Sutter], a lawyer in the city of Kempten and a former student of the University of Heidelberg,^v writes to his humanist friend Nicolaus Ellenbog in the Monastery of Ottobeuren. He sends him a speech that Professor Pallas Spangel had presented to Emperor Maximilian in the name of the university, together with his horoscope, which Magister Georg Helrnstetter had prepared for him on the basis of astrology, physiognomy, and chiromancy.

Preterea cum praefato benckio orationem doctoris pallantis Spangel, quam habuit ad Maximilianum romanorum regem invictissimum nomine vniversitatis haidelbergensis, nunc tibi transmittio, una cum nativitate mca quam magister Georgius Helmstette[r] ex iudicio astrologiae, phisonomiae et chyromantiae artis mihi composuit.^{vi}

In his letter of October 12, Ellenbog responds promptly, showing appreciation for Spangel's speech but disappointment with the horoscope, which he is returning. He does not understand it. He states that he lacks knowledge about chiromancy but proceeds to criticize the astrological methods of Helmstetter.

Orationem doctoris pallantis non invitus legi. Iudicium nativitatis tuae per quendam Helmstetter editum tibi remitto, quod ego nec ad plenum quidem legere potui, et multo minus intelligere, eo quod chiromantiae sim inexpertus. Figuram signavit caeli cum duodecim domibus, sed gradus signorum (qui omni modo hinc necessarij sunt) praetermisit. Sed nec planetas cum suis signis et gradibus apposuit. In summa ex scriptis illius me resolvere nequeo, quare rursum vt ad te irent quantocius curavi.^{vii}

It is easy to establish a close overlap between the fields of expertise claimed by Helmstetter and Faustus. We need to recall simply that Faustus's claim to be an astrologer is confirmed by the sources from Trithemius, Mutianus, the Bishop of Bamberg, Leib, Camerarius, and Hutten. That he claimed to be a chiromantist (that is, a palmist) is confirmed by Trithemius and Mutianus. In general, there is a close correspondence between the tendency to rely on mantic "sciences" as reflected in the Seuter-Ellenbog correspondence and in Trithemius's 1507 letter about Faustus, which describes the name card of Faustus as citing such occult fields.^{viii} We need to remember also that Camerarius warned that Faustus was not scientific about his astrology and was therefore unreliable, a criticism that Ellenbog levels, too.

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Thus, the Seuter-Ellenbog correspondence may be seen as a welcome complement to the scanty evidence about the historical Faustus. Faustus's occupation with astrology and other occult sciences began at the time of his studies in Heidelberg. This overlooked evidence helps to establish a clear distinction between the astrologer Georgius Faustus of Helmstadt and the diabolical magician Johann Faustus of Kundling (= Knittlingen?), which represents a later stage in the development of the famous legend.*

ⁱ Frank Baron: *Doctor Faustus from History to Legend*. Munich: Fink 1978 and F.B.: *Faustus. Geschichte, Sage, Dichtung*. Miinchen: Winkler 1982.

ⁱⁱ Baron: *Doctor Faustus*, p. 13 and Baron: *Faustus*, p. 16. The designation of Helmstetter in the letter of Mutianus may be a distortion of some form of Helmstetter.

ⁱⁱⁱ Karl Schottenloher, who discovered the reference to Faustus in the diary of Kilian Leib, pointed out that there was record of a Georg Helmstetter at the University of Heidelberg. He reported on his find only in a very brief note in a newspaper, and his discovery has remained generally unnoticed (*Munchener neueste Nachrichten* 1913, July 5, No. 338). Cf. Baron: *Doctor Faustus*, p. 90.

^{iv} The Knittlingen claim was seriously challenged by Peter Thaddaus Lang: Zur Biographie des historischen Faustus. Die Frage nach der Zuverlässigkeit einer Quelle aus Knittlingen. In: *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte* 44 (1985), pp. 308-315.

^v "Petrus Suter de Campidona dyoc. Augustens." registered at the University of Heidelberg on March 28, 1490, presumably at a time when Helmstetter was still carrying out his obligatory years of teaching after obtaining his master's degree; Gustav Toepke: *Die Matrikel der Universität Heidelberg*. Heidelberg: Winter 1884, Vol. I, p. 396.

^{vi} Paris (BN), Cod. Lat. Par. 8643 (II), fol. 125^r. Cf. description in Friedrich Zoepfl: *Nikolaus Ellenbog, Briefwechsel*. Münster: Aschendorff 1938, p. 340. Zoepfl reads "Hetmstetten", but it is clear that Ellenbog, who writes Helmstetter in the following letter, intended to write an r in the final position of the name.

^{vii} Op. cit., fol. 125^r-125^v.

^{viii} A similar list of occult sciences, including chiromancy and physiognomy, is linked to Faustus by Philipp Begardi in his *Index sanitatis* of 1539: "... Chiromancei, Nigromancei, Visionomei, Visiones imm Cristal, vnd dergleichen mer kunst..." (Baron: *Doctor Faustus*, p. 107 and Baron: *Faustus*, p. 43.)

* A more recent interpretation of the Seuter-Ellenbog correspondence is available at <http://www.historicum.net/themen/hexenforschung/lexikon>