

Faust. The legend and the book.

(Excerpts and paraphrases from a spectacular scholarly achievement of the 1950ies, the Faust edition with introduction, text and extensive notes by Heffner, Rheder and Twaddell, DC Heath & Co., now sadly out of print. Vol. I, p. 18 ff.).

The 16th century **Doctor Faust** whose life ended around the year 1540 under mysterious circumstances cannot have been merely a notorious swindler and mountebank. The persistent recurrence of reports dealing with his alchemistic exploits, his pact with the Devil, and his horrible demise indicate that he must have been a person of unusual character who excelled his more cautious and conventional contemporaries in daring and in the practical application of his knowledge.

These reports concern a vagrant scholar whose name appears sometimes as Johann Faust, sometimes as Georg Faust, also called Sabellicus.

His activities are reported in various cities in southwestern and central Germany during the first half of the 16th century. He associated with students at Heidelberg, Ingolstadt, Erfurt, Leipzig and Wittenberg. Though he was never admitted to the faculty of any of these universities, his influence outside the classrooms appears to have been considerable; at any rate, in all of these places scholars and administrative authorities alike felt compelled to intervene and expel the corrupter of youth from their communities.

Soon after his death documents were circulated, first in Latin, then in German, which celebrated his talents and his adventures. In these early documents the figure of Faust seems to have merged with older legends of sorcerers and necromancers who defied the taboos of their times and sought to probe the unknown nature of man and the universe. Their strength lay in their "magic," their power over the "right" word; their weakness lay in their isolation, which invited distrust and condemnation. Popular reasoning attributed their success to a pact with the Devil, their frustration to their immorality and sin. As the belief in the power of the Devil over man shows, little confidence was placed in the strength of the human mind. In such an age, a physician who succeeded in saving lives where others had abandoned hope was not altogether free from suspicion of having employed devilish helpers. When even such recognized scholars as Albertus Magnus (1206-1280), Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) and [Paracelsus](#) (1493-1541) were not exempt from persecution, a vagrant alchemist like Faust was scarcely able to escape it.

The first **Faust Book** appeared in Frankfurt in 1587, an English translation was published in the same year. French and Dutch editions appeared in 1598 and 1592.

The anonymous author must have been close to theological circles and adhered to an orthodox Lutheran point of view. He localized the story at Wittenberg, the Saxon university town where the Reformation had started. This gave him the opportunity to contrast Doctor Faust, the associate of the Devil, with Doctor Luther, the man of God.

(Note: it is a different University of Wittenberg that **Hamlet** attended, with different consequences).

One of the significant features of the Faust Book of 1587 is the emphasis on Faust's "speculative" ambition. "Speculation" here is directed toward finding ways to enjoy with impunity those pleasures and acts which medieval ethics had branded as stemming from cardinal sins: pride, greed, voluptuousness, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth (do you know the painting by **Otto Dix**?). To the moralizing author, Faust's fate is a striking example of what happens when man forgets God.

The earliest legend associates Faust with an ambassador from Hell and with an academic assistant, Wagner. He lives with, and has a son by, fair Helen of Greece, both of whom, mother and son, vanish from sight on the same day on which Faust is killed.