

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17503-6 - The English Faust Book: A Critical Edition Based on the Text of 1592

Edited by John Henry Jones

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

THE FAUST BOOKS AND THE FAUST LEGEND

The 'History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus', commonly known as the English Faust Book (EFB), was published perhaps as early as 1588, but the earliest extant edition, the basis of the present text, is that printed by Thomas Orwin 'to be sold by Edward White' (London 1592) (see Plate 6. p. 90), which survives as a unique copy.¹ The work of an obscure but brilliant translator whose identity, cloaked by the cipher 'P. F. Gent', remains uncertain,² it is probably³ the earliest 'foreign' translation of the enormously successful anonymous German Faust Book of 1587 (see Plate 1, p. 2).⁴ It brought the Faust story to post-Armada England at a time of intense dramatic and literary activity, invigorated by the University Wits; Christopher Marlowe snapped it up. There can rarely have been a more felicitous timing or a more apposite engagement.

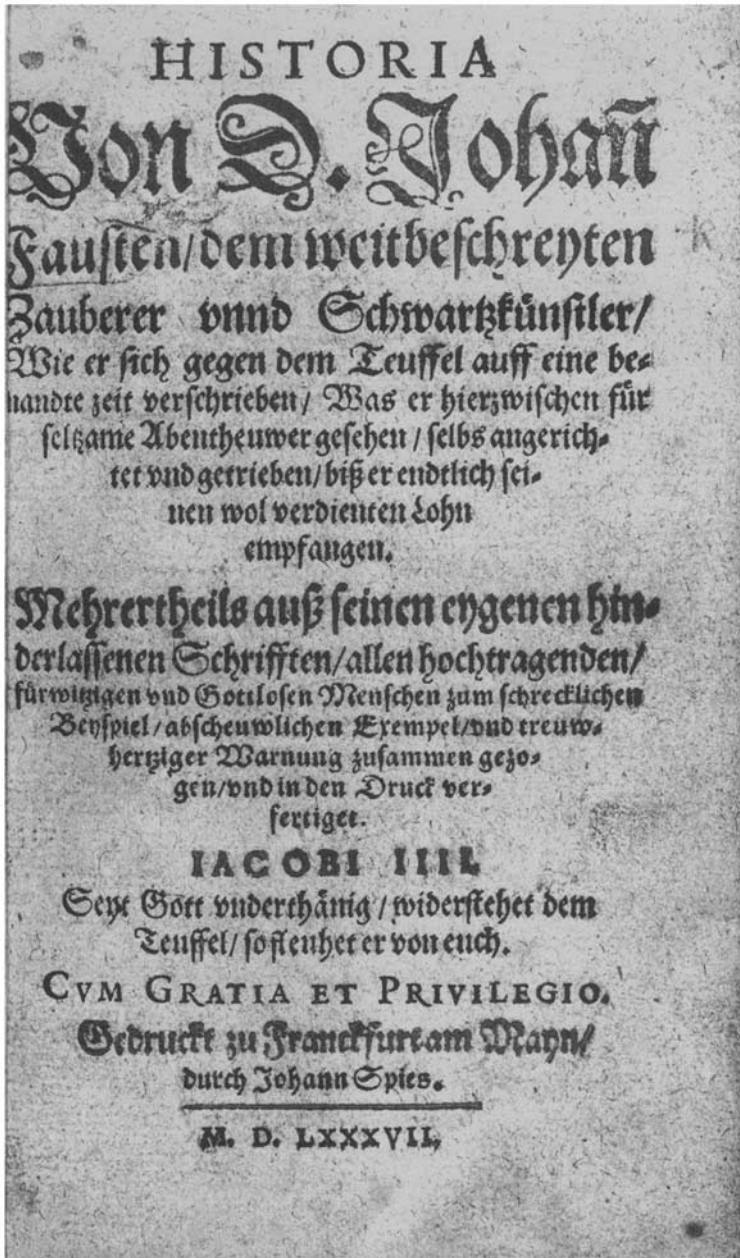
The undoubted immediate and enduring popularity of the EFB is not surprising since it exhibited within a single work many of the characteristics of already popular genres of prose fiction. But in mingling the racy, episodic treatment of prose romance and jest book with an intellectual plot of signal relevance to the age, it transcended all, providing a work at once novel and disturbing, comprehending popular aspirations and their attendant anxieties. Faustus' insatiable curiosity for all things in heaven and earth stamp him as a man of the Renaissance, his zest for world-wide travel (the EFB expands his horizons on the German) and interest in antiquities and sights reflect the contemporary passion for 'chorography'⁵ and the educative Grand Tour. Yet such curiosity awakened misgivings, and above all else, the Faust book is a cautionary tale. The majority of its readers would have accepted the story as horrifyingly true;⁶ the sympathy which the more liberal-minded readers, who

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1 Facsimile of title page of the Spies Faust Book of 1587

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were later to love Falstaff, felt for the lusty, sociable, fun-loving protagonist who could box the Pope's ears and hoodwink the Great Turk, must have made the tragedy the more poignant. The book is undeniably ambivalent in combining exemplary moral exhortation with heroic fashioning, though the extent of the latter depended on the reader's viewpoint: to a Puritan, the pleasurable excesses of the table and the lusts of the flesh were equally reprehensible signs of Faustus' possession, his mock heroism a diabolic satire.

Much of this applies *a fortiori* to the German original, but the more emphatic reception of the Faust book in Germany, compared with that in England, was due to the very different socio-religious milieu of its publication. In the first place, while new to England, the legendary Faustus was already firmly seated in the German national consciousness; the process had begun within the lifetime of the historical 'George' (Jörg) Faustus (died c. 1539), seed for the legend propagated most influentially by his contemporary, Luther, and later, with commanding authority, by Philip Melancthon. In fact, the legend took over so quickly and so absolutely that it is difficult to extricate the historical Faustus, even in contemporary notices.⁷ He was an astrologer, physician and natural philosopher, always on the move (often in flight), always provocative, boasting miraculous abilities and a mastery of the seven liberal arts (occult practices), even claiming to be the fount of necromancers. From his first notice (1508) to the peak of his fame (mid-1530s) he attracted the scorn of the Humanists (Trithemius, Mutianus, Camerarius) and the enmity of civic authorities (Ingolstadt, Nuremberg, Wittenberg), yet he enjoyed the patronage of Franz von Sickingen, the Bishop of Bamberg and the von Hutten family, and had influential friendships at Erfurt and Würzburg. Progressively outlawed, feared by many, respected by others for his 'science', he became famous throughout the land yet remained the classic outsider, rootless, a will o' the wisp, passing, like Socrates and Jesus Christ, without a personally written legacy to assert his true identity.⁸ Of such are legends made.

Luther, who never actually met Faustus, regarded him as a sorcerer, aided by the devil, and predicted he would earn the devil's reward, i.e. the devil would kill him as soon as he had outlived his usefulness. This comes as no surprise in view of Luther's conservatism with regard to 'new' science, his hostility to astrology and his obsession with the ubiquitous presence of the devil, a heritage to be bequeathed to all Protestant Germany in the well-thumbed pages of the *Tischreden*,⁹ the second bible of the reformed faith. Here Faustus is an occasional table topic: 'Much was spoken of Faustus who had a familiar spirit. . .', offering a platform for Luther's attacks on 'the devil's brother-in-law'.¹⁰ By the time these words were read by all who could read, Luther's prediction had been confirmed: Faustus had died obscurely (it was rumoured, violently) in South Germany,

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probably at Staufen in Breisgau.¹¹ The first published account of his death, by the Basel Protestant pastor Johannes Gast,¹² reported that he had been found lying near his bed with his face twisted to the ground, a direction it stubbornly maintained upon the bier even after the head had three times been turned to the fore. Philip Melanchthon in his perennial lectures at Wittenberg¹³ was more explicit: 'He was killed by the devil in a small village in Wurtemberg', and he provides a detailed biographical sketch of 'Johann' Faustus, 'born at Knittlingen', in which the magician's life and deeds are interpreted as devil-dealing; his dog, his horse, are familiar spirits, and he himself is 'a sewer full of devils'.

With this foundation, there could be nothing to arrest the royal progress of the legend. During the following decades it accreted a host of anecdotes from all parts of Germany, especially Upper Saxony, and the deeds of other magicians were fostered upon Faustus: the tale of Trithemius raising the spirit of Mary of Burgundy before the emperor Maximilian becomes one of Faustus raising Alexander the Great and his paramour before Charles V, the miraculous garden of Albertus Magnus blooms at Faustus' door.¹⁴ Some of these short tales began to appear in collections of moral histories in the 1570s¹⁵ testifying to the gathering impetus, but what principally fuelled the public interest in Faustus during this period was the climactic intensification of the German witch craze.

Neither its horrors nor its scale require any rehearsal: it affected everyone. The devil was on every tongue and spawned a specialist genre, the *Teufel-literatur*, in which specific devils (including the *Zauber Teufel*) were allocated to every kind of sin or immorality, and which was later to besiege the presses of Frankfurt with such publications as the *Theatrum de Veneficis* and the *Theatrum Diabolorum*, themselves collections of numerous works devoted to witchcraft and diabolic possession.¹⁶ Even those, such as Weyer¹⁷ and Lercheimer¹⁸, who were courageously outspoken against the burnings, proclaimed their belief in the ubiquitous devil luring mankind to destruction, feeding the imaginations of the enfeebled witches so that they thought themselves capable of supernatural powers but were in reality the victims of melancholic delusions. The pacts which these unfortunates claimed to have made with the devil, usually 'a dark man', were part of their delusion, but neither Weyer nor Lercheimer questioned the ability of an adept magician, versed in the *grimoires*,¹⁹ to conjure the devil and make a pact with him; Faustus and his ilk earned their full condemnation, though the humane Lercheimer, a crypto-Calvinist, limited his suggested punishment to exile from the community.

All these writings made explicit what was implied in Luther's 'devil's reward': Faustus had made a pact with the devil. With this decisive and completing extension, the Faust legend joins common ground with other well-

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known legends of the past, the Catholic legends of Cyprian of Antioch and Theophilus of Adana, and Luther's tale of a student who had made a pact.²⁰ The Theophilus story is the most pertinent, with its emphasis on the contract, written in blood, denying God, Christ and the Holy Ghost, and handed to the devil. Theophilus is saved through the intercession of the Virgin Mary who miraculously recovers the contract; such a salvation was no longer available in Protestant Germany, but in any case, Faustus' damnation was a foregone conclusion from the inception of the legend.

All the ingredients for a fully developed account of the legendary Faustus were now to hand: the 'historical' elements of Faustus' learning and studies, the anecdotal material telling of his feats of magic, and the all-important framework of his pact with the devil and his 'fetching' at the end of his allotted term. Given the furore of public interest and the eagerness of publishers for such a guaranteed success, a 'life of Faustus' was inevitable; the only surprise is that it should have come so late. Johann Spies,²¹ the Lutheran publisher of the German Faust Book, indicates the ripeness of public expectation in his preface to the work:

Everywhere, at parties and social gatherings, there is great inquiry for a history of this Faustus. Indeed, a number of modern writers have touched here and there upon the subject of this magician, his diabolic art and frightful end, but I have often wondered that, as yet, no one has presented this terrible tale in an orderly fashion and published it as a warning to the whole of Christendom. I inquired amongst scholars and learned men as to whether perhaps someone had already written such a work but I was unable to discover anything for certain until recently I received a manuscript from a good friend at Speyer.²²

Spies is describing public interest in the period just prior to the summer of 1587 when he must have received his manuscript, for there is no doubt that he would have published just as soon as it came to his hands: he rushed out the first edition in time for the Frankfurt fair in September.²³ Thus it is probable that the work was actually written in 1586 or later. (A surviving MS of the Faust book, the so-called Wolfenbüttel MS,²⁴ itself clearly a dictated copy, cannot be dated precisely but there are indications that it did not long precede publication.²⁵) If this date of composition is correct then there were two major factors which may have triggered the writing and shaped the inner theme of the work. One was the publication, in 1585, of Lercheimer's *Christlich Erinnerung von Zauberei*, ('Christian Commentary on Magic')²⁶ with its emphasis on the assaults of the devil and the particular mode of assault employed to take advantage of particular failings, including intellectual pride. The other was the late flowering in Northern Europe of Renaissance hermetism and the presence in Saxony of the two most famous and most suspect magicians of the age, John Dee and

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Giordano Bruno.²⁷ Dee was in Leipzig in May 1586, in diplomatic retreat from Prague where suspicions of necromancy had made his presence increasingly uncomfortable and insecure (see below, p. 30).²⁸ As for Bruno, he arrived in Wittenberg in the late summer of the same year and lectured there until 1588, enthusiastically received by the Lutheran scholars.²⁹ Both these men were world famous in academic circles, both for their prodigious learning and their advanced hermetic ideas; both were representative of an extension of philosophic inquiry into areas which possibly transgressed the divinely prescribed limits of human knowledge, Dee with his persistence into 'angelic communication', Bruno with his mysticism involving decan images and 'star demons'. It is just this caution which the unknown, but in all probability Saxon, author of the Faust book has seized upon in his exemplary story and which Marlowe was to pin-point so exactly:

'Faustus. . .
Whose fiendful fortune may exhort the wise
Onely to wonder at unlawfull things,
Whose deepeness doth intice such forward wits,
To practise more than heavenly power permits.'

Dr F: [A1513-7; B2117-21],

for the Faust book is no simple statement of the legend dressed with a Lutheran tendency; it incorporates within that framework the parable of the learned scholar who finds all his gifts inadequate to satisfy his vain curiosity (*Fürwitz*³⁰) concerning the secrets of the cosmos and is led to seek the aid of the devil. His consequent despair in God deprives him of the power to repent; his sin against the Holy Ghost denies him divine grace; he is damned.

The raising of Helen of Greece before the students and Faustus' subsequent cohabitation with her appears to confirm this reading. For beyond the classical allusion (the destructive power of beauty) lay the esoteric identification of Helen with the consort of Simon Magus whom he worshipped as Sophia, the divine wisdom.³¹ In his *Oratio Valedictoria* (1588), Bruno extols 'Sophia, Wisdom itself, beautiful as the moon, great as the sun, . . . Her have I loved and sought from my youth, and desired for my spouse, and have become a lover of her form. . . and I prayed. . . that she might be sent to abide with me. . .'³² These words post-date the Faust book but they may convey an earlier sentiment known in Wittenberg circles, the precise milieu the author chose for his setting of Faustus' life.

Detailed analytical speculation on the process whereby the Faust book achieved its final shape lies outside the scope of this introduction, but the work is generally regarded as a multi-stage production,³³ perhaps beginning with a

Latin original dealing with the principal theme of the devil's entrapment of Faustus, later translated and expanded to include the anecdotal material of the central parts and the three great journeys: through the heavens, into hell, and throughout the known world. There can be little doubt that some of this material, probably including Faustus' pact, was circulating piecemeal amongst the students and thus available to the author/revisionist. Certainly there was more than one Faust book. The Spies Faust book (henceforth *Historia*) makes two clear references³⁴ to a life of Faustus supposedly written by his house-boy Christopher Wagner and takes pains in the story to allow for its production.³⁵ This 'pseudo-Wagner' work (which is not the later 'Wagner book' (see below, p. 10, n. 51)) is lost, but its one-time existence is corroborated in yet another life of Faustus which was being written in 1587, the 'Authentic Life' by the Halberstadt lawyer Georg Rudolf Widman.³⁶ This was not published until 1599, well after the author's death, but Widman began his work before Spies published his Faust book (he probably knew the *Historia* in a manuscript version). His extended 'biography' relies heavily on this source but includes much extra material he claims to have collected from the students and much from the account of 'Johannes Wäiger', as he names the house-boy. Thus Widman supplies information on material available to the author of the *Historia* and illuminates the fashioning of the most complex character in that work, the spirit Mephostophiles.

This fascinating creation probably started life as the brain-child of 'pseudo-Wagner', but as a Mephostophiles quite different from the one depicted in the *Historia*. In Widman's work, this proto-Mephostophiles is the spirit sent to Faustus in fulfilment of the conditions of the pact, a pact there made with the devil in person.³⁷ It is an essentially friendly spirit whose great mischance it is to be subject to Lucifer. 'You should not fear me', Mephostophiles tells Faustus, 'for I am no devil but a familiar spirit; we are amicable to men and gladly associate with them.'³⁸ His friendly concern for Faustus' interests even extends to yoking the oxen to the cart and bringing in the harvest lest his master, Faustus, should incur suspicion by continuing to live a life of luxury while neglecting his estates.³⁹ And there is a touching domesticity about a conversation between Faustus and his spirit while Wäiger is present, recording everything verbatim.⁴⁰ Although this Mephostophiles has clearly been briefed as to what questions he may and may not answer, he never threatens Faustus or attempts to terrify him; that role is left to Lucifer himself.

It is surprising that Widman should have accepted this characterization, for he was an ardent Lutheran, and to Luther all spirits were devils. Certainly it would not do for the author of the *Historia* who makes Mephostophiles the prime diabolic mover of the action, though once in a while the proto-

Mephostophiles glimmers through.⁴¹ The resultant fusion of roles of servant and gaoler, friend and betrayer, tempter and executioner, converts the simple moralistic tale of the precursors (I include Widman) into a subtle psychological drama in which a major component is the revelation of Mephostophiles' true nature, both to Faustus and the reader. The devil incarnate is still brought in to terrify Faustus on occasion, but he is used more as Mephostophiles' ultimate weapon rather than as a tyrannous and unappeasable master. By the time Faustus' moral fibre has been sufficiently eroded by his self-indulgent living, Mephostophiles is quite capable of cowing him into submission himself by threatening to tear him in pieces on the spot.

The *Historia* burdens Mephostophiles with yet another function: he must justify the ways of God, in particular, the damnation of Faustus. The reader is to be reminded that the devil is God's instrument. In a chapter enumerating the manifold assaults of the devil on mankind,⁴² Mephostophiles details the process whereby he possessed Faustus and exonerates himself: 'Why not? For as soon as we saw your heart and what you had in mind and how none but the devil could further your aims, we set to work and made your thoughts and fancies still more insolent and daring.'⁴³ And in a later chapter, absent from the EFB as it has come down to us,⁴⁴ he goes further and berates Faustus in tones more appropriate to Luther than the devil, justifying the punishment which is about to be exacted:

'Because you knew full well what is written in the bible, that you should pray only to God, serve Him and love no other gods but him. . . and because you have not done this but have tested your God, fallen away from Him and committed yourself to us, body and soul, now you must keep your promise. . . You despised the skills God gave you, you were not satisfied with them but invited the devil to be your guest. . . In all your dealings you have called yourself the devil's friend, so now prepare yourself. For God is Lord, the devil but abbot or monk. . . You should not have put so much trust in the devil, for he is God's ape, a murderer and a liar.'⁴⁵

For the author of the *Historia*, Faustus' great sin is self-reliance: in his arrogance, he has despaired in God, without whose support his reason is perverted and his judgments are false. When, finally, he sees the fruits of his folly, this same arrogance denies him God's mercy by placing false limitations upon it. Repeatedly we are told that 'like Cain, he thought his sins too great to be forgiven', thus depriving himself of the ability to repent. Superficially this is all very well, but it ignores Mephostophiles' part in the proceedings, for it is he who drives Faustus to this despair, reiterating Cain's example, and chanting 'Too late!', besides actively preventing good thoughts by bringing in succubae or threatening him with immediate dismemberment when he is on the verge of repentance. One might reasonably question the justice of a God who permits His agent such licence, but the message comes through clearly: the man who

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ceases to rely on God and makes himself the judge of what may be known or attempted, in that instant, crosses the brink of an inescapable maelstrom.

The *Historia* uses all its varied source material to present a structured account of Faustus' subsequent deterioration. In the carefully manipulated dialogues, Faustus' curiosity is turned into an obsession with hell, which only serves to reveal to him his folly and his plight. His desire to marry to satisfy his increased libido is thwarted and he is prompted to embark upon a life-long debauchery with succubae. His travels show him a distant glimpse of Paradise but it is wholly unapproachable. His grand acts at the courts of emperor and prince shrink to fraudulent ploys on peasants and party tricks to impress his student companions. Eventually he becomes a gibbering wreck writing vain lamentations but still unable to repent. The spiritual, mental and physiological breakdown culminates ultimately in the battered and dismembered body lying on a dung heap.

This then supplies the broad design of the Faust book, largely retained in the EFB which, despite additions and omissions, is essentially faithful to the German author's intentions. That the *Historia* lacks artistry in implementing this design is perhaps to be expected considering its peculiar genesis and the varied source material, used rough-hewn and indiscriminately. The language is for the most part barren, many of the episodes are bathetic, Faustus vacillates between the heroic and the abject, sometimes flesh, sometimes paste-board. Yet by some strange magic, the character of Faustus remains a whole, defying fragmentation and absorbing every distortion, just as the Faust book preserves its nightmare unity. The public loved it.

As Spies had doubtless surmised, demand for the *Historia* was instant and widespread. The first edition was sold out within a couple of weeks and three more editions and two new recensions, each with additional chapters of anecdotes, appeared during the same year.⁴⁶ All in all, at least fourteen editions of the *Historia* were published to 1593, twenty to the end of the century, including a version in Low German (1588).⁴⁷ At Tübingen a group of students made a version in rhymed doggerel, published there in 1588 without permission, provoking the first documented example of authoritarian disapproval of the Faust book: the students and publisher were sent to gaol and received a good whipping for their temerity.⁴⁸ But in Frankfurt, Spies continued to flourish, protected by the heavily scored piety of his design to present the story 'as a terrible example and a warning to all Christendom to resist the assaults of the devil'.⁴⁹ He and the other Faust-book publishers were the target for a stinging rebuke by Lercheimer in the third edition of his 'Christian Commentary' (1597),⁵⁰ greatly concerned by the slander to his alma mater,

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Wittenberg, sanctified hearth of the Reformation, and the influence on the curious-minded young whom he thought might be tempted to copy Faustus; but his words came far too late to be effective other than to register protest and distance himself from probable association with the Faust book. By then his compatriots were eagerly enjoying a sequel to the Faust book, the ‘Wagner book’ of 1593,⁵¹ an account of the deeds of Wagner and his spirit Auerhahn after the death of Faustus. This remained popular well into the seventeenth century when the series was augmented by the satirical *D. Johann Fausten Gauckeltasche* (‘Dr Faustus’ Conjuring Bag’) (1607).⁵² The publication of Widman’s ponderous tome (1599) coincided with a decline in demand for the *Historia* which received no further reprintings until the nineteenth century and had quite disappeared from view by Goethe’s time. His knowledge of Faust derived from an expanded (!) treatment of Widman,⁵³ a slight, fanciful Faust story called the *Faustbuch der Christenden Meinenden* (1725),⁵⁴ Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and, possibly his prime inspiration, the German folk play of Faust, a favourite item in the repertoire of the puppet theatres.⁵⁵ The origins of this Faust play are obscure but in all likelihood it evolved from tailored versions of Marlowe’s play as performed by English actors, ‘die Englischen Comedianten’, touring in Germany in the late sixteenth/early seventeenth centuries.⁵⁶ If so, this reimportation of Faustus into Germany at a time when the first wave of public interest was nearly spent was of great consequence for the continental development of the theme.

In such a process, the English Faust Book clearly plays a crucial role. None of the other early translations (Danish (1588), Dutch (1592), French (1598), Czech (1611))⁵⁷ initiated comparable developments, nor did they show the same imaginative flair – and although the seminal success of the EFB is very much due to place and timing, the author should be allowed much credit both in arresting Marlowe’s attention and supplying him with unique material; nor was the influence confined to Marlowe: Greene and Shakespeare owe indirect debts via the prose romance of ‘Friar Bacon’, itself directly modelled on the EFB in an attempt to share the lucrative market (see below, pp. 55ff). The early printing history of the EFB is rendered problematic by the non-survival of the first (and possibly, second) edition or any manuscript; but from 1592 until the eighteenth century the EFB was never long out of print,⁵⁸ attesting to an abiding popularity of the work, far outliving that of the *Historia* in Germany, and penetrating the Enlightenment, both in its original form and in a number of cheap abridgments. A verse treatment was extant from c. 1633,⁵⁹ and a Faust ballad, *The Just Judgment of God upon . . . John Faustus*, to the tune of ‘Fortune My Foe’, proved a good money-spinner for the seventeenth century ballad syndicates (‘Fortune My Foe’ became equally well known as ‘Faustus’, sure indication of a hit).⁶⁰ And just as