

# MAGUS

# MĀGUS

The Art of Magic  
from Faustus to Āgrippa

ANTHONY GRAFTON

THE BELKNAP PRESS OF  
HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

*Cambridge, Massachusetts*

2023

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Printed in the United States of America

First Belknap Press of Harvard University Press edition, 2023

Published in the United Kingdom by Penguin Books Limited

First printing

Jacket design by Jaya Miceli

Jacket artwork courtesy of Getty Images

9780674295117 (EPUB)

9780674295124 (PDF)

THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE PRINTED EDITION AS FOLLOWS:

Names: Grafton, Anthony, author.

Title: Magus : the art of magic from Faustus to Agrippa / Anthony Grafton.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023. | English; some quotations in Latin and Italian.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023006851 | ISBN 9780674659735 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Faust, -approximately 1540. | Pico della Mirandola, Giovanni, 1463–1494. | Ficino, Marsilio, 1433–1499. | Trithemius, Johannes, 1462–1516. | Agrippa von Nettesheim, Heinrich Cornelius, 1486–1535. | Magic—Europe—History—To 1500. |

Magic—Europe—History—16th century. | Science and magic—History. |

Humanists—Books and reading—Europe—History. | Renaissance.

Classification: LCC BF1593 .G73 2023 | DDC 133.4/3094—dc23/eng/20230415

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2023006851>

*To the memory of Louise Grafton, magician*

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## Introduction

# The Magus Anatomized

## *The Case of Faustus*

**A**t some point in the 1520s or 1530s, Philip Melanchthon came downstairs in his house in Wittenberg, the Lutheran citadel, to eat with Doctor Faustus. Like other German Protestant professors, Melanchthon was married and had four children, but he kept as much distance as he could from domestic affairs.<sup>1</sup> Still, household and scholarship often came together at the dinner table, where female skill and work enabled male professors to offer hospitality to visiting scholars.<sup>2</sup> At this dinner, though, Melanchthon did not treat his guest graciously. True to his position as Martin Luther's right-hand man, he denounced Faustus, insisting that he give up his evil ways and repent—or suffer damnation. The magician who came to dinner replied with equal asperity, but his threats were this-worldly: “Sir, you continually rebuke me with abusive words. One of these days, when you go to the table, I will make all the pots in your kitchen fly out of the chimney, so that you and your guests will have nothing to eat.” Melanchthon's rejoinder had all the irony and wit that the German scholars of his time—and later ones—were famous for: “You'd better not, or I'll shoot you right in the art” (“Das soltu wol lassen, ich schiesse dir in deine kunst.”). The pots stayed in the kitchen where they belonged since the troublesome guest could do nothing against “the holy man.”<sup>3</sup>

The story is not easy to evaluate. Its author, who signed his book on magic as “Augustin Lercheimer,” was in fact a Heidelberg professor named Herman Witekind who had studied at Wittenberg. He took offense at the stories that reached print in 1587 in the first book-length account of Faustus's deeds, the *Book of Faust* (*Faustbuch*), and he not only criticized

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some of them but also offered his more instructive additions. The Wittenberg Reformers, Luther and Melanchthon, played suitably heroic roles in his anecdotes.<sup>4</sup> This particular story, if genuine, must have derived from local oral traditions.<sup>5</sup> Melanchthon liked to tell stories about magicians—including Faustus—during his lectures. But he expanded freely and imaginatively on anecdotes with magical content, and pupils like Joannes Manlius, who recorded and published these, sometimes embellished them further as they did so.<sup>6</sup> We do not know if Melanchthon really met Faustus. In this case, moreover, Lercheimer's informants may well have softened the original wording of the story. Melanchthon shared his friend Luther's taste for scatology, and it seems altogether likely that he really said, "Ich scheisse dir in deine kunst" ("I shit on your art").<sup>7</sup>

One point, however, emerges clearly. Melanchthon's conversation partner—the man known to us as the historical Faustus—was a magus, a learned magician. He plied this trade decades before peddlers began hawking the *Book of Faust*, which exaggerated his genuinely colorful adventures, around the taverns and marketplaces of Renaissance Germany.<sup>8</sup> When he threatened to conjure a wind that would expel Melanchthon's pots from his kitchen, he relied, as his opponent said, on an "art"—a formal body of knowledge that gave him special access to the secret powers of nature, to angelic or diabolic help, or to all at once. Melanchthon, for all his contempt, acknowledged the power of Faustus's magic. In fact, he told his students stories of the magus's amazing deeds. Confronted by another magician in Vienna, Faustus showed his superiority by a simple (if dramatic) trick: he "devoured" his rival and then allowed him to reappear unharmed in a cave a few days later.<sup>9</sup> Melanchthon—himself an expert on astrology and the natural forms of magic—admitted that his antagonist had some standing in the field.<sup>10</sup>

The late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as many historians have shown, saw the development of a new discipline—or set of disciplines. Contemporary practitioners sometimes called it "natural magic" or "occult philosophy," to emphasize that it was both profound and innocent, while critics tended simply to call it "magic" and argue that it depended on diabolic help. The most influential practitioners of magic were men, who wrote their treatises in Latin, the language of learning. Some of them became celebrities. In 1593, Caspar Waser, a young Swiss scholar who was making a grand tour of Europe, visited Naples. He saw the sights, from the Sibyl's cave to the



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INT.1 Ferrante Imperato, Museum. 1599. Wikimedia Commons.

volcanic fields of Pozzuoli.<sup>11</sup> But what fascinated him most were two men he spent a fair amount of time with in Naples. Ferrante Imperato, a legendarily erudite apothecary and natural historian, greeted Waser warmly and showed him his museum, which Waser thought worthy of an “imperator”—an emperor.<sup>12</sup> Giambattista della Porta, a nobleman who wrote comedies as well as treatises on natural philosophy, hinted that he knew how to control the weather (though he refused to give a demonstration) and discussed the ciphers of an earlier writer, Johannes Trithemius.<sup>13</sup>

Meeting these two men—especially della Porta—the young Reformed Protestant from Zurich had entered the domain of magic. In 1558, della Porta had written a treatise entitled *Natural Magic* that went through many editions—fifteen in Latin, six in Italian—even before he expanded it in 1589. He presented magic as an ancient art, one that had

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flourished in ancient Persia and Egypt as well as Greece and Rome. Its practitioners, the magi, knew how to draw on and enhance the secret forces of nature: “This art, I say, is full of much vertue, of many secret mysteries: it openeth unto us the qualities and properties of hidden things, and the knowledge of the whole course of Nature.”<sup>14</sup> The magi had to be experts in a range of disciplines, from alchemy to astrology, which enabled them to perform actions that ordinary, unlearned people thought miraculous. Della Porta’s treatise offered a catalogue of the wonders that the magus could perform.

From della Porta’s point of view, and very likely from Waser’s, Imperato’s museum was one great demonstration of the ways in which nature and art both created wonders: a visual counterpart to his book, especially in its later, expanded edition. Della Porta believed in direct study of nature and took pleasure, in later years, in using his experiences (as well as formal arguments) to show that ancient authorities like Aristotle had gone wrong. When he turned his attention to atmospheric phenomena, he argued that they obeyed the same mechanisms as subterranean ones: thunder and earthquakes shared mechanisms and differed only because thunder took place in the sky and earthquakes underground.<sup>15</sup> Happily, his critical study of violent natural phenomena yielded a new form of natural magic: della Porta prided himself on knowing ways to create artificial thunder that made a terrifying noise but did no harm.<sup>16</sup> It was these experiments, as he called them, that Waser had heard about and wanted to see performed in 1593, though della Porta did not publish them until much later. Magic, in other words, could utilize practices from cutting-edge natural philosophy.

As we will see, the new magic came in many different forms. Every synthesis was controversial, and many of them proved labile when they attracted hostile criticism. In the first edition of *Natural Magic*, della Porta distinguished, as most of the protagonists of this story did, between two forms of magic: a good version that exploited the powers of nature and an evil one that depended on the powers of demons.<sup>17</sup> Yet he also described how to make talismans that could attract the powers of the planets, not only because they were made of the correct material but because they bore the correct images—recommendations that seemed to go against his own warnings and that attracted the notice of the Inquisition.<sup>18</sup> In later editions, he eliminated these controversial practices in favor of others that he could present as entirely natural.<sup>19</sup>

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But almost all of the learned magi agreed on certain points, most of which della Porta summed up very clearly in the first version of his treatise. They saw the cosmos as a single being, connected in all its parts by rays that emanated from the planets and shaped much of life on earth. Astrology, the discipline that tracked the angles at which the planets irradiated the earth at a given place and on a particular day and time, could give information about the characteristics and temperament of individuals and help them plan their lives, decide which enterprises to pursue, and educate their children. By offering analyses of the characters and prospects of peoples, it could also help to explain the course of world history. On earth, stones, plants, animals, and fish also had powers, many of them “occult”—not perceptible at first sight. Similarities and dissimilarities could serve as keys to this web of connections, enabling the magus to chart and exploit the powers it transmitted. Mastery of these properties could also be a source of power. Alchemy, in particular, could endow its students with an especially powerful form of knowledge, one that made it possible to transform matter itself. Finally, as we will see, many magi—though not Faustus—promised that their art could heal the body and even help the soul rise to union with God. The magus, in his Renaissance form, urged his followers to lead an ascetic life and promised them access to the highest realms of knowledge.

In practice, no two magi taught or advertised exactly the same set of techniques. And no two contemporaries agreed on which of them were valid. For every writer who was willing to countenance talismanic magic as a way to communicate with beneficent beings, another insisted that it was nothing more than a straight road to damnation through commerce with devils. For every theorist who praised the divinatory power of astrology, there was another who denounced it as worthless and deceptive. Pico della Mirandola was present at the creation of learned magic, and provided materials and arguments that proved durably useful. Yet he rejected astrology on principle. Everyone agreed, too, that some of the others who competed with them as magi were actually charlatans, hawking spurious techniques and recipes. Still, the continued presence into the seventeenth century of learned magic on the book market, at princely courts, and in wealthy religious communities makes clear that the promises of the magi appealed to discriminating patrons and practitioners.

This book traces the rise of learned magic, from its medieval origins to the synthesis that Agrippa created in 1533. It does not aspire to completeness.

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Some of the scholars and thinkers who play parts in it accepted alchemy, as della Porta did, as a discipline that could wield power over nature. Recent scholarship has made clear how widely alchemy was practiced in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, how much effective technical content it possessed, and how reasonable the claims of its practitioners were. It played a crucial role in the rise of something larger than magic: a vision of humans as able to act upon and shape the natural world.<sup>20</sup> In this book, however, I aim to be guided by the actors in my history. Some of them, as we will see, took a serious interest in alchemy, and sometimes alchemical texts provided crucial elements for magical treatises. But most of these magi did not see themselves primarily as alchemists nor did they treat the art with the sort of attention that they devoted to others, even though they drew essential ideas from alchemical texts.

The chapters of this book follow the steps by which this process unfolded. We will follow the reasons why some medieval philosophers pursued learned magic and others forbade it. We will watch inventors who developed and mythologized their own new ways to gain power over nature and society and trace the complex interactions of technology and magic. We will follow the learned men, in Italy and in the Holy Roman Empire, who framed new justifications for pursuing magical powers and added new practices to the panoply of accepted ones. And we will examine the influential synthesis that Agrippa crafted from these multiple components.

This is the story: But what of the art itself? How did magic look and feel to the learned men who practiced it? One way to find out is to mount one of the Renaissance's favorite spectacles: a public dissection of a single individual. Faustus, the magus we began with, makes a perfect star for this period show. Many contemporaries recorded his adventures, which later sent Marlowe and Goethe into literary flights, in vivid first- and secondhand accounts.<sup>21</sup> A rich tradition of Faustian scholarship, erudite and combative, goes back to 1693, when Carl Christian Kirchner defended a Latin dissertation *On Faustus the Charlatan* at the University of Wittenberg.<sup>22</sup> Its proponents have weighed, measured, and evaluated every fragment of original evidence. Uncertainty remains on basic points. Nonetheless, the intense biographical research devoted to Faustus has established a core of usable information about who he was, what he did, and what his observers made of it—enough material to support not only a reconstruction of his career but also an interpretation of what it meant to Faustus himself and to those who knew him.<sup>23</sup>

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Recent scholars—above all Günther Mahal and Frank Baron—have subjected this evidence to close examination. Baron, in particular, has done much to set Faust’s career into a recognizable period context. Their work—and their debates—provide the framework for this inquiry.<sup>24</sup> The historical Faustus probably began life either in Helmstadt, not far from Heidelberg, or in Knittlingen, a small town near the Black Forest that still houses the Faust Museum.<sup>25</sup> Official documents record that Georg of Helmstadt—one of the historical figures most plausibly identified with Faustus—entered the university of Heidelberg in 1483. This would mean that he was born sometime in the 1460s.<sup>26</sup> Georg received his BA in 1484 and his MA, the basic teaching degree, in 1487, ranked second out of ten candidates.<sup>27</sup> Thanks to the patronage of the baron Franz von Sickingen, one ill-willed contemporary reports, he became a schoolmaster in Bad Kreuznach. But he lost this position, sometime before August 1507, since he fled after being charged with committing sodomy with students.<sup>28</sup>

A series of reports track Faustus’s progress around the cities of the Holy Roman Empire. An archival document from 1520 records that Georg Schenk, the Bishop of Bamberg, paid him ten gulden for “a nativity or judgment”—both forms of astrological document that offered advice about the client’s future.<sup>29</sup> Astrologers lived and worked in every city in the Holy Roman Empire. But Faustus proved unusually troublesome. His behavior continued to give offense. A decree of the Ingolstadt city council instructed him, in 1528, “to spend his penny somewhere else.”<sup>30</sup> A similar document, from Nuremberg in 1532, recorded the magistrates’ refusal to offer a safe conduct to “Doctor Faustus the great sodomite and necromancer.”<sup>31</sup> These records reveal what made Faustus’s reputation special. Magic, as Faustus practiced it, seems to have included both the technical discipline of astrology and more frightening forms of conjuring and divination. Evidently the authorities saw him as a criminal and worse. Cities expelled him. But they did not jail him—much less execute him—even for sodomy and necromancy, both capital offenses at the time.<sup>32</sup> He enjoyed fame for his frightening power as well as for his disagreeable ways—an impression confirmed by the action of the Ingolstadt councilors, who made Faustus swear an oath not to take vengeance on them after he left their city.<sup>33</sup>

More detailed reports come from personal letters and other unofficial sources. In 1506, a Benedictine abbot, Johannes Trithemius, interrupted a journey at an inn in Gelnhausen. There he found a man named “Master

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Georg Sabellicus, the younger Faustus” had been handing out advertisements for himself, visiting cards that described him as “the chief of necromancers, an astrologer, the second magus, a reader of palms, a diviner by earth and fire, second in the art of divination by water”<sup>34</sup>—the same combination of disciplines that the archival documents mention, presented in strikingly boastful language. Local priests told Trithemius that Georg had made even wilder claims. He bragged that if “all the works of Plato and Aristotle, together with their whole philosophy,” should disappear from human memory then he, “like another Hebrew Ezra, would be able to restore them all with increased beauty.”<sup>35</sup>

Apparently, Faustus moved from town to town, and possibly from tavern to tavern, offering his services for money—not necessarily a dishonorable practice in the years when Albrecht Dürer did much the same in order to sell his prints. Faustus made a reputation. Trithemius directed his letter, which he wrote on August 20, 1507, to a well-known mathematician and astrologer, Johannes Virdung. Virdung, who was expecting a visit from Faustus, had written to Trithemius for information, and Trithemius set out to convince his friend that Faustus was “a vagabond, a babbler, and a rogue, who deserves to be thrashed.” “When he comes to you,” he said, “you will find him to be not a philosopher but a fool with an overabundance of rashness.”<sup>36</sup> Trithemius mentioned that numerous informants in several cities had had similar experiences—further evidence that Faustus’s performances attracted widespread interest.

Most importantly, Trithemius’s letter identifies the primary services that Faustus had to offer. He divined the future by a variety of means, such as drawing up horoscopes and interpreting the patterns made by molten lead when dropped into water. But he also claimed to have special powers to affect the world around him. Trithemius noted that Faustus called himself “the source of necromancy, when in truth, in his ignorance of all good letters, he ought to call himself a fool rather than a master.”<sup>37</sup> As a “necromancer” and “magus,” Faustus claimed to be able to perform wonders—to make people, animals, and objects do things entirely outside the natural order, as well as to predict the future. Perhaps Faustus went so far as to brag that he could heal the sick and raise the dead. Evidently, then, Trithemius classified Faustus as a particular, recognizable kind of bad magician: a magical service provider who predicted the future and performed wonders in the present—or at least claimed to do so.

Many accounts of Faustus from the 1530s and after originated in Wittenberg. Luther and his followers, who dominated the local university, emphasized the devil’s omnipresence and the ease with which sinful humans

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could sign their souls away to him. Their anecdotes about Faustus reflected their belief that he had made a formal pact with the devil and emphasized the diabolic origin of his powers—ideas that, in the late sixteenth-century age of witch persecution, would become central themes of Faustus's story.<sup>38</sup> Luther, for example, told his pupils that Faustus called the devil his “brother-in-law.”<sup>39</sup> Others recorded that he traveled with two familiars, a dog and a horse, and died when the devil strangled him.<sup>40</sup> According to one report, his body kept turning face downward on the bier even after his attendants placed it faceup.<sup>41</sup> These necrogymnastics, like the company of uncanny animals, unequivocally revealed the source of Faustus's powers.

Others, by contrast, dismissed him as a trickster. According to the famed opponent of witchcraft prosecutions Johann Wier, Faustus sought revenge on a prison chaplain who claimed to have run out of wine. In return for more wine Faustus gave him a supposedly miraculous salve, which would remove the chaplain's beard without the use of a razor. The substance consisted of arsenic, which, rubbed on with no special preparations, took off not only the hair “but also the skin and the flesh,” as the victim himself indignantly recalled.<sup>42</sup> Faustus's contemporary, the Nuremberg Greek scholar Joachim Camerarius, himself a learned astrologer and aficionado of natural magic, warned a friend that Faust played “jugglers' tricks” “to fill [his audience] with the wind of silly superstition.”<sup>43</sup> These men treated Faustus not as the sober practitioner of an ancient art but as a trickster who took advantage of his victims' human fallibility.

Yet opinions varied, and some witnesses—including Camerarius himself—spoke in more than one key about Faustus's magic. Even the hostile and skeptical Wier admitted, in a burst of self-contradiction, that Faustus “could achieve absolutely anything with his empty boasts and promises.”<sup>44</sup> Every story about Faustus reveals another facet of learned magic. Melanchthon glossed his critique of Faustus with an almost admiring remark about the magician's supernatural patron: “The devil is a marvelous artisan. For by a certain art he can achieve things which are natural, and which we do not know. For he can do more than man.”<sup>45</sup> Here Melanchthon described the devil's art as that of a supremely inventive craftsman, a “*mirabilis artifex*,” who could draw out the “occult virtues” of nature as no human could.

Most of Faustus's actual practices went unrecorded. But one episode connects him to a world of marvelous craft. He lectured publicly on Homer at Erfurt, where he briefly held an academic post. He described the heroes of

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Homer's epics—King Priam, Hector, Ajax, Ulysses, and Agamemnon—in vivid detail, “each as they had appeared.” Excited students demanded more wonders. Faustus agreed to grant their desire in the next lecture hour. When a swarm of eager listeners showed up, many of them not registered, he brought the Homeric characters in “one after another.” Each hero “looked at them and shook his head as if he were still in action on the field before Troy.” Finally he introduced Polyphemus, the red-haired, bearded, ferocious Cyclops—who entered with a man's legs dangling from his mouth, frightened the students, and refused at first to leave but instead “hammered on the floor with his great iron spear.”<sup>46</sup>

The magus knew how to stage a show. In this case, he staged a particular kind of demonstration—a practical one that others had been developing for more than a century, ever since Leon Battista Alberti amazed visitors to the Council of Ferrara-Florence in 1438–1439 with his dazzlingly deceptive images of moving ships at sea and rising and setting stars.<sup>47</sup> A fifteenth-century natural philosopher and inventor, the Paduan Giovanni Fontana, explained how to project images—including frightening ones. A vivid, highly dramatic illustration represents a learned man, dressed in the robes that reveal his status, holding a transparent lamp. The light of a candle transforms a tiny image of a devil armed with a sphere, inside the lamp, into a vast, frightening projection—“a nocturnal apparition designed to inspire terror,” in Fontana's words. Such a device would have worked, though it would have been hard to use secretly. Still, Fontana insisted that he had made the device “with his own hands and from his own invention,” and at least one contemporary text describes similar techniques.<sup>48</sup> Faustus used his own expert knowledge of optics, light, and shadow to project large-scale images of Greeks and Trojans on a sheet, which a confederate shook so that the figures seemed to move. Tricks like this explain why Melancthon connected Faustus with technical skills possessed by the devil.

This story reveals one more aspect of Faustus's art—one that contemporary witnesses did not discuss. When he brought the ancient heroes back to life, he entered yet another intellectual territory—that of the Renaissance humanists whom he presumably first encountered at Heidelberg. These scholars searched for classical texts that had fallen out of circulation and purged them of scribal errors. As they came to know the ancients in the close, granular way that textual criticism enabled, they felt that they enjoyed direct contact with the ancient authors they knew best—so direct that Petrarch wrote letters to his favorite Roman writers: Cicero, Virgil, and Livy.<sup>49</sup>





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Some Latinized or Hellenized their birth names. Luther's friend and Faustus's enemy created his public name, Melanchthon, by translating his original name, Schwarzerdt ("Black Earth"), into Greek.<sup>50</sup> Others, now known as "antiquarians," searched for the statues and mosaics that could reveal what ancient writers and their characters had looked like, noting the clothing, armor, and other attributes that set them apart from moderns.<sup>51</sup>

Faustus also seems to have chosen his name and his identity—possibly from a character in the ancient story of Simon Magus, as told in texts ascribed to Clement, a bishop of Rome in the second century, possibly from the prominent French humanist Faustus Andrelinus. According to Trithemius, he also called himself Sabellicus.<sup>52</sup> If so, he adopted the title of a prominent Italian scholar, Marcus Antonius Sabellicus, who like Andrelinus had studied in Rome with the influential teacher and antiquary Pomponio Leto. In choosing these names, as in calling himself a "magister" (master) and a magus, Faustus emphasized his allegiance to classical culture.<sup>53</sup>

Humanists tried to restore, from corrupt manuscripts, the incorrupt and perfect words of Cicero and Livy and to reconstruct, from the bizarre rituals of illiterate priests, the dignified liturgies of early Christianity—even if, as in a famous story told by Erasmus, they found themselves trying to convince a priest who had chanted "mumpsimus" for twenty years that he should really say "sumpsimus."<sup>54</sup> They acknowledged the magical nature of these restorations of what had been lost for centuries by the term they applied to them in those difficult cases where ordinary inferences from evidence were not possible: "divination," the same term Faustus used for astrology. Just as the magus divined the future, so the humanist sometimes divined the past—the part of it, at least, that his manuscripts hinted at but did not reveal. As Poggio Bracciolini put it while denouncing a scribe: "The man who copied the books was the most ignorant person alive today: I had to divine, rather than read."<sup>55</sup> Calling the ancient heroes back to life was humanistic magic—magic with a flavor of learning distinctive to this period. Magicians had been bringing the dead back to life for centuries. But only in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did they bring classical celebrities back to life.

Faustus, moreover, offered to carry out more astonishing feats of magical scholarship. At a faculty banquet held to celebrate the graduation of some MA students, he recited glittering lines from the lost plays of Plautus and Terence—authors whose extant works were favorites in part because they had so many quotable lines. Then he offered to bring the plays back into existence for a few hours so that they could be copied and used. The members of

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his audience, which included some theologians, turned down this generous offer on the grounds that the devil might have interpolated “all sorts of nasty things” into the texts.<sup>56</sup> But it was not totally outlandish by the standards of the time. Giovanni Nanni of Viterbo, Dominican and papal theologian, had invented and published a series of texts describing the history of ancient Egypt, Chaldea, and Etruria.<sup>57</sup> Trithemius believed that the Hebrew priest Ezra had restored the Hebrew Bible from memory after Cyrus sent the Jews back to Palestine. He himself re-created whole swathes of early German history by reinventing lost texts that described them.<sup>58</sup> No wonder that he found Faustus’s boasts about his ability to restore lost texts especially annoying.

The rest of this book will trace in more detail the ways in which the learned magus and his new ways of making knowledge came into being at this time and in these places. This inquiry was originally inspired—as so many other works of scholarship have been—by a great historian, Frances Yates, who taught at the Warburg Institute and carried on its traditions in highly original ways. She re-created what she saw as the elegant new magic of the Renaissance: the work of men like Ficino and Pico. They replaced the older, disreputable magic of medieval sorcerers with a discipline that offered true power over nature as well as new forms of physical and spiritual therapy. New encounters with ancient books, she argued—especially those wrongly ascribed to an Egyptian sage, Hermes Trismegistus, inspired this movement. It was a revolution that faced backward, seeking to transform modern society by reviving ancient wisdom, and that helped in its turn to inspire the new science of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yates told her story with great learning and a bewitching style.<sup>59</sup>

Her work met the fate that often awaits brilliant scholarship. She helped to open up the history of magic and its relationship to other fields. A number of her contemporaries—especially Eugenio Garin and Paolo Rossi—also argued, in their own ways, that the magic of the Renaissance had played a vital role in the creation of modern science and philosophy.<sup>60</sup> The dozens of talented explorers that she and they attracted to the field have extended and revised Yates’s original thesis almost beyond recognition.<sup>61</sup> Medievalists and Renaissance scholars alike have shown that even the most innovative magi of the age of Faust drew on both theories and practices from their scholastic predecessors.<sup>62</sup> Historians of technology have made clear how the inventors known in the Middle Ages and Renaissance as “engineers” crafted extraordinary devices and argued, as the alchemists did, that they possessed and could provide others with special powers.<sup>63</sup> And students have revised Yates’s depiction of the work of the most original and

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influential Renaissance magi, showing that they drew on a diverse array of texts and promised their readers special forms of knowledge as well as power.<sup>64</sup> The Hermetic texts were nowhere near so central as she thought. But Yates was not wholly wrong. Always prescient, she had inklings of some of these points—especially the importance of technological innovation and the range of sources the magi drew from.

If Yates saw Renaissance magic as a solid, public discipline, classical in its source and pure in its aesthetics, both its critics and its practitioners nourished many doubts. Magic had no officially canonical texts and no set place in a curriculum. Many of their practices and assumptions came directly from medieval sources—some of them by authors who denounced magic in theory but engaged with and practiced it nonetheless. Clerical authorities periodically subjected it to scrutiny and condemnation. And magi themselves were among the first to dismiss certain colleagues as charlatans.<sup>65</sup>

Faustus was not the only fake who enraged Trithemius, as he made clear in a bitterly hostile (and somewhat satirical) passage:

The foolish mathematician, who imitates and follows the devil, opens the way to kings and princes. First he approaches curious servants, he produces carefully made up books, shows off the names of their great supposed authors, displays the images of the planets, not to mention the characters of the demons, the rings, scepters, crowns and all the instruments of demonic magic. With these he promises that he will do and show everything that a man can think or that Hell can conceal. He promises to raise the dead and all the ancient heroes, promises hidden treasures, promises to make enemy armies that have not been captured surrender. No need to say more. There is nothing so hard, nothing so wonderful, that it is not in his power to produce the desired effect. When bidden to do so, he flies through the air to Arabia, brings Hercules and great Alexander back from the dead, and will call up your father for you, if you wish, or your mother, from the lake of Avernus. As a prophet he knows all past, present and future things.<sup>66</sup>

Faust's promises reflected not the profundity of his art but the depth of the cynicism with which he deceived his clients.

Sometimes, the good and the great eagerly consumed magical texts and services. Yet even they had their doubts. The Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I made no secret of his interest in astrology, which he promoted

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both at the University of Vienna and at his court. In fact, he installed his favorite astrologers and magi in professorial chairs and encouraged them to publish their work in the field.<sup>67</sup> He did little to conceal his interest in magical practices. Maximilian wore a magical ring, appropriately called “The Devil” (“der Teufel”), until it was buried with him, and he tried to use it to replenish his financial resources at a time of great need. He even asked the abbot of Stams, a wealthy monastery in Tirol, to send him one of his monks who knew how to conjure up spirits, though the abbot discreetly, and disappointingly, replied that they were all dead. When Maximilian chatted up a Venetian ambassador, their conversation turned to the dead people who had recently come back to life in the Steiermark.<sup>68</sup>

Maximilian recorded these interests, moreover, in the documents that he created as his monuments for posterity, the third-person Latin autobiography that he dictated to his secretaries and the illustrated German fictionalization of his early life and later triumphs, the *Weisskunig*. In his autobiography, he recalled that “wishing to inquire about the secrets of the world, he learned the art of necromancy. This he never wished to pursue, since the church condemns it and it is very dangerous to man in both body and soul. And he had books from his father’s treasures, the like of which were not to be found in this world.” This was a delicate dance to the tune of two steps forward, one step back. It left the clear impression that the young prince’s scruples did not diminish his curiosity.<sup>69</sup> In the *Weisskunig*, he claimed that he had studied magic in defiance of his father’s wishes in order to expose the art as evil.<sup>70</sup> The practice of magic, in other words, could lead to the possession of the keys to the kingdom—or at least to a place at the emperor’s side when he was feeling hard-pressed by his bankers or his enemies. But it could also stimulate suspicion, and even lead to disaster. More than one alchemist and magus ended up on the scaffold, exposed as a fraud.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as we will see, suspicion spread that most forms of magic—not only the witchcraft analyzed by Dominican demonologists but also forms of learned magic that had fascinated important scholars—were inspired by the devil and pursued by those in league with him. Brilliant scholars have explicated the logic of these suspicions.<sup>72</sup> In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, many Europeans not only reproduced and approved of this imaginary world but also claimed that they knew it by direct experience—not their own, but that of witches whom they and others had caught and interrogated. This was another mental world that many of Faustus’s contemporaries believed he inhabited comfortably—so much so that, over time, he would come

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to be retroactively associated with the witches and accused of having made a pact like theirs with the devil. Even as learned magic gained more adherents and stature, they had to be on guard lest their pursuits be confused with what they saw as the radically different ambitions of the devil's minions.

Around 1500, new thinkers—religious reformers (Catholic and Protestant), female mystics and “living saints,” printers, and so on—finally entered the public realm. Deft performances in public and in print enabled them to build reputations and expand the boundaries of discussion. Correspondence—much of which circulated widely—enabled them to form new alliances. Some challenged long-established beliefs and practices; others drew on the past to reform the present. All did intensive boundary work to set themselves apart from those whose traditional powers and methods they challenged. Just as important, however, were these religious reformers' efforts to separate themselves from those of their fellow innovators whom they might seem to resemble but whom they saw as incompetent, dishonest, or in the clutches of the devil. And all crafted new genres that enabled them to publicize their new enterprises and offer instruction to readers, as well as disciples, in their techniques. Magi responded to their presence as they did that of others closer to them with similar interests. Eventually—as Deborah Harkness has shown in a brilliant study—some magi even managed to set up the sort of household that Melanchthon inhabited and that Faustus visited.<sup>73</sup> In the period when their art was taking shape, however, only one or two of them were enabled by patronage to live in such comfortable conditions.

The magus—at least as embodied by Faustus—was a characteristic figure of the decades just before and after 1500, the period traditionally called the High Renaissance. In those years, as Erwin Panofsky pointed out long ago, barriers that had previously separated occupations and disciplines fell, not for the first time but more dramatically than ever before. Individuals like Leonardo and Vesalius transformed traditional arts and forms of knowledge by combining the study of texts with the highest level of craft practice.<sup>74</sup> The magus is a less respectable figure than the artist or the scientist, the Erasmian humanist or the Protestant reformer—but he belongs in a dark corner of the same rich tapestry. And his art resembled, in some ways—for example, in its fertile combination of ancient, medieval, and modern components—other arts and disciplines that took shape at the same time and that now seem more respectable, such as anatomy and natural history. Like his contemporaries in many fields, the magus both learned from and rejected his medieval predecessors. We turn to them now.

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