

Epistula Obscurorum Virorum

In the Fall of 1515 a publication entitled *Epistula Obscurorum Virorum ad Venerabilem Virum Magister Ortvinum Gratium Daventriensem Coloniae Aggripinae bonas litteras docentem varijs & Locis & temporibus missae ad deum in volume coactae* appeared in Germany.¹ With its publication a clash between two rival groups of theologians reached its climax. The quarrel grew out of, what was originally referred to as, the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin dispute or the Cologne debate over Hebrew publications. In time it evolved into a scholarly argument which eventually divided the academic world north of the Alps into two antagonistic camps. Consequently German theologians and humanists held their breath for nearly a decade until Luther issued his challenge to the church which ultimately gave rise to new alignments, and overshadowed everything else.

An important lesson to be learned from this episode is that individual actions can have unimagined consequences. In 1499 the city of Nürnberg expelled its Jewish population. The latter moved, considering 20th century events, of all places to the town of Dachau. One needs to keep in mind, that there was a "Burgfrieden" (peaceful coexistence) whereby Jews lived relatively unmolested in Germany. Though, Jews had to pay an annual tax per capita. At any rate, the action of the Nürnberg city council is perplexing, given the status quo. Be that as it may, sometime in 1505 Johannes Pfefferkorn, an erstwhile Jew from Bohemia, along with his wife Anna and son converted from Judaism to Christianity after they had been miraculously cured of "Jewish blindness." The baptism was apparently performed in Cologne. However, the focus in this paper is not on the conversion itself, but on what occurred in the aftermath of the conversion.

Given the discrimination against Jews in Europe at the time it is understandable that here and there, a few Jews caved into the temptation to accept Christianity in order to escape oppression. At the same time one should keep in mind that there were hundreds of thousands of Jews who despite the oppression clung tenaciously to their faith. What is hard to comprehend is

¹ Letters of Obscure Men to the Honorable Master Ortvinus Gratus from Deventer. Teacher of all proper disciplines at Cologne, sent from different places and at different times, finally, however, collected in one volume: hereafter referred to as EOVS with the number of the part and the number of the letter being referenced: i.e. EOVS I. I = Epistolae obscurorum virorum Part I letter 1.

that instead of being satisfied with his new found soul, the "baptized Pfeffer," as he was later derisively referred to,² and others like him, developed an aggressive missionary, albeit, an unenlightened zeal in an effort to convert their former brethren to their newly embraced faith. Pfefferkorn and those like him were likely motivated by their desire to demonstrate their reliability, enthusiasm, and sincerity of their conversion to their new found friends. When Pfefferkorn failed convince his former brethren to convert he felt compelled to take them on in word and deed. The upshot was that Pfefferkorn launched a series of angry attacks against Jews and Jewish culture.

The fanatic zeal of converts of all persuasions is, unfortunately, even today a familiar phenomenon. Pfefferkorn authored a number of publications between 1507 and 1509 in which he sought to warn the Christian world about the diabolical schemes of Europe's Jews to overthrow the established order. In *The Jews Mirror (Judenspiegel)*; *The Jew's Confession (Judenbeicht)*; *How Blind Jewvs Celebrate their Easter {Wie die Blinden Juden vr Ostern halten}*; and *The Jewish Enemy , (Judenfeind)*, Pfefferkorn portrayed Jews, with increasing acerbity as usurers and Christian haters. These publications were a cunning tactic to portray him as knowledgeable and well meaning as he sought to incite fear and distrust of Jews. Ultimately he insisted that all Jewish books, especially the untruthful, menacing, and error prone *Talmud* be burned, and that *all* Jews be forced to convert to Christianity.

He was clever in his approach of influential people and knew how to turn them into allies and supporters. Indeed, he was successful in convincing important members of the Dominican Monestary in Cologne to support his efforts. The Pfefferkorn - Reuchlin dispute was sparked by Pfefferkorn's publications. Though, within time Pfefferkorn was relegated to providing material for, what became an escalating controversy. The veracity of his subsequent claims notwithstanding, he continued to agitate against the Jews. The actual leadership of the crusade to eliminate Jewish writings was quickly assumed by Jakob von Hochstraten who had just been

² Johannes Reuchlin refers co Pfefferkorn several times as the "taufte Pfeffer" or "baptized Pfeffer" in his (*Gutachten*) Opinion.

appointed Prior of the Cologne Monastery as well as Inquisitor General for the Church provinces of Mainz, Trier, and Cologne.³

In 1509 Pfefferkorn convinced Emperor Maximilian I (Holy Roman Emperor) to support his crusade against Jewish attempts to undermine the Christian faith. The emperor gave him a written mandate which allowed Pfefferkorn to confiscate all Jewish books that conflicted with Christian doctrine and those which deviated from Jewish doctrine. He made little headway, though, because Archbishop Uriel of Mainz, who did not share his fanaticism, raised objections. The Archbishop insisted that scholars be consulted about the advisability of destroying works authored in Hebrew. Pfefferkorn agreed, and without thinking suggested Johannes Reuchlin as a suitable referee.⁴ Pfefferkorn gave little thought to the fact that Reuchlin did not care for the antiquated theological perspectives so prevalent at the time. It is hard to say for certain why Pfefferkorn thought that Reuchlin would support his efforts to eliminate Jewish writings. He may have been familiar with Reuchlin's *De Verbo Mirifico (From Wonderful Words)* which did contain some passages which were critical of the *Talmud*. Moreover, Reuchlin had up to that point served as the attorney for the Dominican order. Still Pfefferkorn, who had previously visited Reuchlin in Stuttgart, thought that he would be amenable to the scheme. We really do not know what transpired during Pfefferkorn's visit with Reuchlin, and so anything one says is pure speculation. Though, we do have the conflicting accounts of the encounter from both Pfefferkorn's and Reuchlin's perspective.

Pfefferkorn later insisted that he visited Reuchlin in order to seek his advice on the entire matter. He also claimed that Reuchlin received him cordially (*humanissime*) and that he was pleased to see him. He also claimed that Reuchlin advised him on how to proceed with the Emperor in order to see the affair through to a satisfactory conclusion.⁵

³ Max Brod. *Johannes Reuchlin und sein Kampf* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer. 1965) pp. 186-189.

⁴ Reuchlin was born in 1455 in Pforzheim. He was educated at Heidelberg, Paris, and Basel. He also studied law at Orleans. He died June 30, 1522 in Bad Liebenzell and was buried at Stuttgart where he had resided during the dispute with the Dominicans at Cologne.

⁵ Max Brod. *Reuchlin*. p.194.

Reuchlin, though, rendered a much different account of the meeting. According to his account Pfefferkorn approached him with the Emperor's mandate and asked him to accompany him and assist him in executing the emperor's mandate. Reuchlin turned the request down, for personal reasons. He also told Pfefferkorn that no one would likely pay much attention to the writ because it contained numerous errors. Prior to his departure Pfefferkorn asked Reuchlin to write down the errors, which he said he did.⁶

The Emperor issued a new Mandate on November 10, 1509 in which he assigned the task of confiscating "Jewish Books" to the Archbishop. In the meantime four Universities had been consulted about the matter. The University at Cologne supported Pfefferkorn forthwith. The Universities of Mainz and Erfurt quickly followed the lead of their colleagues at Cologne. Only the theologians at the University of Heidelberg thought it wise to remain silent on the subject since they did not consider the subject worth discussing, at least not at that time. In the process, two Cologne Dominicans, the Inquisitor-General and *Magister Noster* Jacob von Hochstratten and the erstwhile Rabbi, turned Priest, Viktor von Carben along with Johannes Reuchlin of Stuttgart, were drawn headlong into the controversy. Reuchlin was drawn into the dispute without any effort on his part, but once engaged, he fought back energetically.

Reuchlin 's expertise in Latin was vastly superior to that of the theologians and lawyers of his day. He had also become proficient in Greek while studying at Basel. During his visits to Italy in 1482 and 1490 he became acquainted with Pico della Mirandola which led him to develop a deep interest in the mystic teachings of *Cabala*. He also began studying Hebrew and by the time of the Hebrew Book controversy Reuchlin was unquestionably the leading authority on the Hebrew language and literature in Germany. His Hebrew text *De Rudimenticis Hebraicis* (*The Elements of Hebrew*) was published in 1506 and established him as the authority in the field. In 1496 Reuchlin was invited to teach at the University of Heidelberg where he became the mentor of an enthusiastic circle of Humanist students. Reuchlin represented one of the most important aspects of the late Renaissance that of the scientific study of language as a preparation for sacred as well as secular literature. Reuchlin was not trained as a theologian, but this did not deter him from discussing biblical texts as literary works. During such discussions he would not

⁶ Reuchlin's account is contained in the *Augenspiegel* p. A2

hesitate to point out that scriptural interpretations were frequently at odds with the correct literary reading of the passages in question.

While it was clear from the outset that von Hochstraten and von Carben would support Pfefferkorn, it was expected that Reuchlin would render an objective and scholarly opinion on the matter. In 1505 Reuchlin had published *Tütsch missive, warumb die Juden so lang im ellend sind* (*German Letters. Why the Jews have been in misery for so long*) in which he argued for tolerance towards the Jews. Now, in the *Gutachten*,⁷, his reply to Pfefferkorn, which has come to be regarded as a Humanist classic, he reaffirmed his earlier position and argued against extreme measures. He posited that only those Jewish books which were clearly slandered Christianity should be confiscated. He went on to say that most books, including the *Talmud* and the *Cabala* were quite harmless, even instructive, and should not be destroyed.

The Dominicans at Cologne reacted fiercely to Reuchlin's opinion. They did so primarily because Reuchlin had not been able to refrain from making personal attacks against Pfefferkorn, especially by questioning the sincerity of his conversion. Pfefferkorn, full of wrath, wasted no time in answering Reuchlin's *Gutachten* (*Opinion*) in the Spring of 1511 with *Handspiegel* (*Hand Mirror*) in which he questioned Reuchlin's knowledge of Hebrew let alone his competence to render an opinion on such an important discussion as this. The essay was dedicated to Arnold von Tongern (or Tungern), his ally at Cologne, who subsequently became a well known figure in the EO. Reuchlin was enraged at Pfefferkorn's impudence, and a satirical reply was not long in coming.

In the Fall of 1511 he released *Augenspiegel* (*Eye's Mirror* actually means Eyeglasses, the idea being able to see more clearly), through his printer-publisher, Thomas Anshelm in Tübingen. In it he discussed not only the various aspects of the controversy based on documentary evidence, but he also responded to thirty-six inaccuracies in Pfefferkorn's

⁷ Johannes Reuchlin. *Gutachten Ueber Dus Juedisch Schrifttum*. Oktober 6, 1510 as printed in Johannes Reuchlin *Augenspiegel*. (Tübingen: Thomas Anshelm, 1511) Faksimili Ausgabe Johann Froben Verlag München.

Handspiegel. Many of the inaccuracies fell into the realm of the absurd. Pfefferkorn, for instance, insisted that when a Jew greeted a Christian at home or on the street with the words "shed wilkum" they were actually saying the devil be welcome.⁸ Pfefferkorn sought to confuse shed wilkum with seit wilkum (seit willkommen) the former being a medieval German expression for "welcome." Reuchlin pointed out that this was pure nonsense and that this was not even grammatically correct in Hebrew, at least not the way Pfefferkorn had written it. According to Reuchlin, Sched, or Devil, has a period on the right side of the S. and if the letter is pronounced S the period is on the left side, and therefore any peasant could distinguish between shed and seit, and the whole thing amounted to nothing more than goose-chatter.⁹ Still, the obvious clumsiness of Pfefferkorn's attempt to discredit the Jews did not prevent Luther from using the same "devil be welcome" argument some 40 years later in his anti-Semitic arrack *Von den Juden und ihren Liigen*.¹⁰ Indeed, Luther relied on a number of Pfefferkorn's incendiary fabrications. At any rate, the crescendo of the slanderous exchange which grew out of Reuchlin's opinions about Pfefferkorn's *Handspiegel* and Reuchlin's *Augenspiegel* transformed, what had been a dispute over Jewish literature, into a quarrel between Pfefferkorn and his supporters on one side and Reuchlin and his supporters on the other. Over the next ten years a flood of letters was issued by both sides. Not counting the EOV the dispute ultimately resulted in the publication of 43 books and pamphlets.

After the publication of the *Augenspiegel*, the Cologne faction was heard from again. This time however, they pursued the legal route and attempted to render it harmless through prohibition and condemnation. Their numerous attempts to achieve this goal included summoning Reuchlin to a Court of Inquisition presided over by von Hochstraten and sending an envoy to Paris *in order to obtain a judgment against the Augenspiegel from the theologians and lawyers at the Sorbonne*. These efforts are depicted dearly and essentially accurately in the EOV and for that reason there is no need to belabor them further at this point.¹¹ At any rate, it is not surprising that they pursued this option since Theologians thought very little of Humanists

⁸ Reuchlin. *Augenspiegel* p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Max Brod, *Reuchlin*. p. 216: the English title of Luther's work reads *About the Jews and their Lies*.

¹¹ See letter EOV II, 3

whom they derisively referred to as poets.¹² They were after all untrained in theology and therefore could not teach anyone anything about interpreting the Scriptures. Theologians chose, instead, to rely on the Inquisition as a defense.

In 1512 the German edition of *Declaratio*¹³, an essay written by Reuchlin which had previously been published in the *Augenspiegel*, was reprinted. The purpose for republishing it was to clear up some misunderstandings. Unfortunately though, he was not able to soothe the ruffled feathers of the Cologne faction. This time Arnold von Tongern replied with the, in the EOJ frequently mentioned, *Articuli sive propositiones de iudaico foveore nimis suspecte ex libello theutonico domini J. Reuchlin*¹⁴ A Year later Reuchlin responded with *Defensio Contra Caluminatores suos Coloniensius*¹⁵ in which he applied slander quite liberally. Moreover, it is the first time that the bold assertion, one that is further developed in the EOJ, is made that Pfefferkorn's wife engaged in immoral acts with the Dominicans at Cologne. Needless to say this resulted in a flood of letters from the Dominicans at Cologne. In this campaign, Ortvinus Gratus took the lead. He was to become well known as the protagonist of the EOJ. Prior to this he played a substantial role translating Pfefferkorn's pamphlets into Latin. In the EOJ it is frequently asserted that Ortvinus Gratus and his associates were the real authors of Pfefferkorn's writings, though it is unlikely that this was the case.

Reuchlin took a new approach in his dispute with the Cologne intelligentsia, and this brings us to the EOJ. In March 1514 he published *Clarorum Virorum Epistolae*¹⁶ through Thomas Anshelm in Tübingen. This collection of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew letters, which Reuchlin had received from his friends, were meant to demonstrate to the world that he did not stand alone in his fight with the obscure ones at Cologne, that to the contrary, he had the most respected scholars on his side. These included, in order, Erasmus, Neuenar, Ulrich von Hutten, Thomas Moore, Pico della Mirandola, Bernhard Adelman, Johann Geiler, Peutingen, H. Bebel,

¹² Anyone who was not a scholastic was considered to be a poet.

¹³ Ain clare verstentnus in tütsch (A clear understanding in German)

¹⁴ Extracts from a collection of heretical points of view from the *Augenspiegel*

¹⁵ *Defense Against the Heretics at Cologne*

¹⁶ *The Letters of Distinguished Men*

Sebastian Brant, Johann von Amorbach, Beatus Rhenanus, Rudolf Agricola, Willibald Pirckheimer, Mutian, Crotus Rubeanus, Eoban Hesse, Hermann von dem Busche, Gerbel, Cuspinian, Yadian, Spalatin, Glarean, Melanchton, Oekolampa, Capito, Eberbach, Marsilio Ficino, Dietrich von Pleningen, Nicolaus Ellenbog, Emperor Frederick III, and others.

Not even the Humanist curia had been able to find fault with Reuchlin's ideas, though Pope Leo X was slow in exonerating him. The Cologne faction was not idle either. The Sorbonne at Paris rendered its judgment against the *Augenspiegel* which Pfefferkorn translated and published in *Sturmglöck*.¹⁷ in 1514. In December 1514 the Judgment handed down in Paris was also published as *Acta Doctorum Parrhisiensium* through the Printer Quentell at Cologne, which Ortvinus Gratius had provided to him.¹⁸ Reuchlin's supporters replied with a satirical essay *Contra Sentimentum Parrhisiense*.¹⁹ The Inquisitor-General had in the meantime also appealed to Pope Leo X to condemn the *Augenspiegel*. Before the pope could render a judgment on the *Augenspiegel*, another collection of essays appeared. The pope did finally act in 1520, when motivated by Luther's revolt, he pronounced the *Augenspiegel* a dangerous book.

In the meantime, the nature of the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin polemic was about to take on a new direction. All of the essays, which the respective parties had exchanged up to this point were concerned specifically, as one could discern from their titles, with the argument over the confiscation of Jewish books. One exception was Reuchlin's *Clarorum Virorum Epistolae* (Letters of famous men), the title of which undoubtedly served as the model for the more famous essays which followed. As mentioned earlier, in the fall of 1515 the *Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum* (letters of Obscure Men) made their appearance. They had been composed as a counterpart to Reuchlin's essay, though not by Reuchlin. The authors chose to remain anonymous. They even hoped, perhaps rightfully so, as Erasmus pointed out,²⁰ that the *Viri*

¹⁷ Storm Bell: it would be akin to a warning bell.

¹⁸ *The settlement of the Parisian Doctors*

¹⁹ *Against the Decision of the Parisians*

²⁰ Erasmus wrote to Johannes Caesaerius on April 5, 1518 about a certain prior in the vicinity of Brussels who had enthusiastically acquired twenty copies of the EOV in order to distribute them to his friends. Ten years later he mentions this episode again, though this time he added that the Franciscans and Dominicans in England received the EOV with enthusiastic approval. He added "what fool could he more foolish?"

obscuri would, for at least the time being, welcome these essays as contributions from their own brethren. The authors chose to retain their anonymity for two reasons. The first was simply for safety's sake. The second, and perhaps the more important, was to make the letters, which were really addressed to Ortvinius Gratius more believable. Though, it did not take long for a careful reader to catch on.

With the appearance of the EOV the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn dispute evolved into a larger argument between humanists and scholastics. Reuchlin continued to battle to clear his name in the ecclesiastical courts. However, the enlarged dimensions of the controversy relegated Reuchlin to the sidelines where he stood helplessly by and watched as what had been a dispute between himself and the "baptized Pfeffer" metamorphose into a full blown attack on Europe's theological underpinnings. The EOV served as the vehicle for that attack. The irony contained in these letters was already apparent in the sentence structure of the title. The title of Reuchlin's volume follows the established sentence structure of classical Latin. The title of the EOV, though written in Latin, follows German sentence structure. From the outset it was apparent how one was to regard the Latin of the obscure men. The deliberately misleading imprint of both part I and part II was more obvious. Part I initially appeared with the imprint Aldi Minuti, from which the readers were supposed to conclude that it had been printed in Venice by the famous Aldus Manutius. Manutius, though, had already been dead well over half a year when the book was printed. More important, though, in the EOV he was designated as Minuti, which a careful reader knowledgeable in Latin, would associate with Minutus, meaning small or paltry. The first edition of Part II bears the imprint Romanae Curie and according to the by line was printed in Bern, the place of the infamous deeds of the Dominicans (see EOV I, 22. 47).

The success of Part I of the EOV was unimaginable. Both camps quickly supplied themselves with copies. Erasmus was one of the first to obtain a copy, but he was among those who were careful to hold themselves back as one discovers in Part II (EOV II , 59), *Erasmus est homo pro se*, or Erasmus stands solely for himself. Among Reuchlin's closer friends there was solidarity, especially in the Humanist circles of Mutianus Rufus in Erfurt, where the author of Part I was to be found. The complicated question regarding the authorship of the EOV will be discussed further on in connection with Part II. During his studies in Italy Mutianus embraced

Italian Humanism. He had also accepted the Platonic interpretation of Christianity which became extremely popular in Italy after the deaths of Mirandola and Ficino. Mutianus argued that the Platonic argument could only be understood by philosophers and Humanists, but that it remained out of reach of the mass of people. The acceptance of Platonism led him to take an ethical view of religion and it was for this reason that he welcomed the EOV. He derived particular satisfaction from the criticisms of the clergy for their unworthiness, the vulgarity of the common people, and the purely formal and external acts of faith. Mutianus is credited with inspiring a number of young Humanists, especially Ulrich von Hutten who had been drawn into the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy almost from the outset.²¹

About a year after the release of the original edition the third edition of the EOV appeared in Speyer. It was expanded by seven letters, the so called Appendix to part I. The Appendix is the work of Ulrich von Hutten, the author of almost all of the second part of the EOV. Shortly before the appendix appeared, the first refutation of the EOV was issued by the *obscuri viri* at Cologne. They were proud of their academic degrees and therefore agitated by the disrespect Reuchlin and his encourage of poets had shown them. We know this because the fourth letter in the appendix (EOY I, 45) refers to the recently completed *Defensorium Ioannis Pfefferkorn Contra Ioannem Reuchlin*.²² It was also published in German. The *Defensorium*, was supposed to defend Pfefferkorn against the famous and criminal letters of obscure men, and is frequently played upon in part II of the EOV. The *Defensio Pepercorni* is the Latin translation of *Pfefferkorn's Beschrymung (Pfeffercom's Defense)* however, in it the translator Ortvinus Gratus changed so much that the reader is presented more with the translator's thoughts, than a faithful translation. This fact, judging by the numerous innuendoes contained in part II of the EOV was not lost on its authors.

In the spring of 1517 part II of the EOV appeared. As already mentioned. The imprint simply read *Impressum Romanae Curie*, nothing further. It was printed in Speyer, despite the by-

²¹ Ulrich von Hutten ([488-1525) had been raised on the antiquated ideas of chivalry. He had been sent to the Monastic school at Fulda which he found intolerable. He "fled" Fulda and joined Mutianus Rufus at Erfurt where he met other Humanists and found that they shared his distaste for old the fashioned schooling such as that at Fulda.

²² *Pfefferkorn's Defense Against Reuchlin*

line claiming that it had been printed in Bern, by the same publisher who had released the third edition of Part I of the EOV. It should be clearly understood that the two parts are fundamentally different in their use of satire. Part II was far more direct in its use of satire and in it many more contemporaries are referred to by name. It is understandable, therefore, that the excitement over its appearance should be greater than the excitement over the publication of part I. Erasmus, for one, liked part I because he was not mentioned in it. But he was clearly uneasy over his numerous mentions and characterizations in the appendix to part I and part II. Consequently, he distanced himself from the EOV in a letter written to Johannes Caesarius on August 16, 1517. He admitted that he himself had satirized people in his *In Praise of Folly*, but that he had done so innocuously. He never mentioned anyone by name. The letter found its way to Ortvinus Gratius who included it in his weak imitation of the EOV in 1518. He did not fool anyone, since it became quickly apparent for what purpose, and by whom the *Lamentations Obscurorum Virorum*²³ had been written, even though the author tried to brand the Humanists as *obscuri viri*.

It is quite understandable that in the case of a satire as effective as the EOV readers racked their brains in an attempt to discover who the clever authors of these ingenious letters might be. The most frequently mentioned name was Ulrich von Hutten. Part of the reason was that von Hutten did the least of anyone to divert suspicion from himself. Those in the circles surrounding Willibald Pirckheimer in Nürnberg, in particular, were convinced that von Hutten was the author. Even Erasmus was occasionally mentioned as the possible author. This is attested to by the numerous letters he wrote in which he energetically rejected the notion that he collaborated in writing the EOV. The fact was that none of the participants, with the exception of von Hutten, admitted any connection to the EOV. In the humanist circle at Erfurt, where the ingenious idea of a satirical counter collection to the *Clarorum Virorum Epistolae* actually came from, there was silence as far as the authorship of the EOV was concerned. It was not until some seventeen years after the appearance of Part I that someone finally broke their silence.

²³ *The Wailings of Obscure Men*

In 1532 Luther requested the reformer Justus Mentius²⁴ to reply to an essay in which Crotus Rubeanus had attacked Luther.²⁵ Old friends had over time become opponents. Justus Mentius had attended the Monastery school at Fulda where he was a student of Crotus Rubeanus, and at the time, like his teacher, joined Luther's movement. Mentius remained loyal to the Lutheran reform movement, but Rubeanus returned to the old church after several years. In the *Responsio Amici* to Luther Mentius reminded his erstwhile teacher of the great times, *antequam exortus esset Lutherus*, that is before the appearance of Luther, when they were in accord, and about that *Libellum illium tuum, qui decem possit exercere Democritos, obscurorum scilicet virorum epistolas* (that book of yours which could have kept ten Democritos busy, that is to say, the letters of obscure men) and that he also knew that Rubeanus still loved it more than *quam simian prolem* - an ape his progeny. Hence Rubeanus is clearly identified as the author of the EO. In the same paragraph Mentius also points to von Hutten. But the belated and isolated testimony of Mentius is not adequate enough to allow us to delineate von Hutten's contributions from those of Rubeanus and others. For this we are indebted to Walter Brecht who, in 1904, provided a definitive answer to the question of who authored the EO.²⁶ Brecht conducted a thorough examination of the literary style in addition to other relevant facts and evidence in his quest to arrive at a satisfactory answer. The upshot is that he was able to determine that Rubeanus authored the original edition of the EO. The appendix to part I and all but six of the letters in part II (EO III13, 17, 29, 42, and 61) were penned by von Hutten. Aloys Bömer to whom we owe the best modern edition of the EO, wanted to credit von Hutten with writing the

²⁴ Rubeanus was born Johannes Jager in 1480 in Dornheirn, Thüringen. While living in Venice he latinized his name. Later he chose the name of a mythological archer, Crotus, to which he added Rubeanus, the name of his home town. He studied at Cologne, after that he spent two years educating two young nobles. After this he returned to Erfurt. He next went to Fulda when he served as head master of the Monastery School, where he conceived of the EO. While in Erfurt and Fulda he remained in close contact with the clever Mutianus Rufus in whom he had a congenial mocker as a friend. From Fulda he once again went to Cologne. By 1517 he was in Italy (Bologna and Rome). After his return to Germany he was appointed as vice-chancellor in 1520 of the University of Erfurt. Here, in 1521, he met Luther who was traveling through the area. In 1530, however, he returned to the Catholic Church and became a priest. He died in 1539.

²⁵ *Ad Apologiam Joannis Croti Rubeani responsio amici. ad quem privatim eum scripsit.* (A private, friendly written reply to the narratives of Joannis Crotus Rubeanus.)

²⁶ Walter Brecht. *Die Verfasser der Epistulae Obscurorum Virorum.* Straßburg, 1904. Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker, Bd. 43.

first letter of part I as well, but his argument for doing so was not totally convincing.²⁷ Other names that have been mentioned as possible authors of the six remaining letters in part II are primarily those of Jacob Fuchs, von Hutten's friend from his Bologna days, and the neo-latinist Herman von dem Busche who is mentioned several times in the EOV.

Of the two parts of the EOV the first is without a doubt the more amusing and ingenious. Crotus Rubeanus benefited both from his intimate knowledge of the various relationships at Cologne, where he and von Hutten had studied together since 1505, as well as the ignorant life led by the monks on a daily basis at Fulda. In a letter to Mutianus, Rufus depicted the monks at Fulda as *sacrificuli idiotae et paene analphabetae* - idiotic sacrificing priests who were barely able to read or write, and among whom drinking, gambling and debauchery²⁸ were celebrated. In these Monks he found ideal models for *his* obscure men. Added to this was the fact that Rubeanus was a master of indirect satire. He remained within acceptable parameters and presented his subjects in such a way as to make them believable. Equally important is the fact that he did not focus on the real origin of the EOV, the Jewish Book controversy, which strengthened his efforts even more. In the appendix to part I and in part II, on the other hand, one senses the impetuous nature of von Hutten, who due to his argumentative nature chose to employ direct satire. This clearly had to prove disadvantageous given the more refined letters of the opposition. Moreover, von Hutten was determined to be more factual. For this reason, the Reuchlin debate is the dominant theme of part II. In light of this it is understandable that Erasmus complained about so many of his contemporaries being mentioned in part II, a feature that was noticeable absent in part I. Still, those letters in part II which were based on von Hutten's personal experiences are very effective. Particularly those letters relating to his Italian experiences, the stay in Rome which ruined the eternal city for him, and the time spent in Bologna, Ferrara, and Venice. In Italy, where he also became proficient in Greek, he developed an appreciation for the satirist Lucian. That influence remained with him and within time he

²⁷ Epistolae Obscurorum Virorum. HRSG. von Aloys Bomer. BD.1, Einführung; Bd. 2, Text. Heidelberg (Stachelschriften. Ältere Reihe. I. 1.2).

²⁸ It is interesting that Rubeanus uses *Minne* to describe their behavior in this regard. *Minne* is associated with a courtly, or a high kind of love. To use *niedere* as an adjective for *minne* has the effect of creating an oxymoron. But it did have the intended effect by changing what was; a high love to a love of the lowest possible level.

became Germany's greatest satirist. Given his Italian experiences it should come as no surprise that 28 of the 62 letters in part II claim Rome as the point of origin.

The authors of the EOV sought to make the Dominicans at Cologne look like fools. They achieved this in part, by ridiculing the degenerated scholasticism with its over-exaggerated senseless, and puerile system of argumentation and sophistry, which served as the intellectual foundation of their world. The scholastics, one could legitimately argue, were indeed a foolish lot who conformed to accepted ideas and could not understand why anyone would question tradition. Moreover, they naively believed that the search for truth was finished. One ought to remember that theologians and professors of theology were wedded to what amounted to impossible methods of Biblical exegesis that had matured during the Middle Ages. The struggle between Humanists such as Reuchlin, von Hutten, and their friends and the rigid theologians was one between free inquiry and authority. And when simple logic failed, humanists resorted to satire. There are no other examples such as the EOV in world literature which can be hailed as an ingenious parodied swan song of the old as a sign of a new age, unless one wishes to perceive certain forerunners in the parodied texts of middle Latin Literature. They provide us with examples of traditional medieval monastery pranks, and at the same time combine the Renaissance intellect with the vulgar comedy of contemporary German popular literature.

The scholastic method is employed *ad absurdum* because it allows the authors to discuss a good many ridiculous questions. Inquiries of this sort include, for example, should one refer to a beginning *Magister noster* as *Magister nostrandus* or *noster magistrandus* (EOV II): or must a *Juris Doctor* greet a *Magister noster*, even if the latter is not wearing his academic garb (EOV I. 26), and so forth. The unconditional belief in the authority of the degenerated scholasticism, which rejected individual thought, and which regarded Aristotle as infallible, is severely undermined in the EOV in that the authorities (so "says the philosopher" etc.) had to suffer for even the most banal things. The cult of Aristotle is thoroughly exposed through the depiction of *prandium Aristotelis*, or an Aristotelian feast (EOV I, I), of which the great philosopher served as the patron, but at which everyone behaved rather unphilosophically. The minimal education, not to mention, ignorance of the scholastic *obscuri viri*, is documented by several drastic examples.

Among these is the skeptical report of a certain Petrus of Worms (EOV II 44) about an unknown Greek poet who had exactly the same name as the Latin poet Homer.

It should also be noted that the effect of the EOV depends to a large extent on its linguistic form. Indeed, an essential characteristic of the EOY is the use of obscure Latin which means that linguistically one has to be prepared for anything to happen. Next to the well-established narrow scholastic forms one frequently encounters new Latin forms which were created by appending monstrous suffixes, *Typus honorificabiliter*, to old Latin or proper German words. There was also no lack of hybrid expressions wherein German words were given Latin case endings and freely mixed with Latin words and other hybrid forms. In addition, one perceives the strong influence of the vernacular language on the Latin syntax. One could almost argue that these *obscuri viri* wrote their native German cloaked in Latin, which means little if anything in Latin. The upshot is that, thanks to the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin debate, the authors of the EOV were able to unleash a stunning critique against ignorance and obscurism. The reformation movement should not be underestimated either. Indeed, it above all can be felt in part II, making the EOV, and, in a sense then the Pfefferkorn-Reuchlin dispute, a forerunner of the rapidly approaching reformation movement.

While individual controversies, such as the one involving Pfefferkorn and Reuchlin, broke ground for the reformation, there are important differences between those involved in the Reuchlin affair and the followers of Luther's movement. In 1520 three important events transpired: Luther burned the Papal Bull condemning *his* heresies; Pope Leo X condemned the *Augenspiegel*; and the Babylonian *Talmud* was printed for the first time at the behest of Pope Leo X. The irony should not be lost on us that Reuchlin, who died in 1521, had spent 10 years defending the *Talmud* against all opposition. He was condemned by the Pope for his stand, yet the Pope rescued the *Talmud* from future attempts to have it destroyed. The individuals surrounding Reuchlin were not interested in the destruction of the established order, they were only interested in correcting the abuses, the ignorance, and the superstitions which had engulfed the Roman Church. Luther never held the humanists in high regard and mocked their efforts on Reuchlin's behalf. Indeed, he was the antithesis of what they stood for. Though, there were some humanists who initially joined his movement, the majority of them, eventually returned to the mother church.

Be that as it may, the humanists sought to point up the narrow intellectual qualities of the scholastics, notably the Dominicans. Reuchlin sought to counter Pfefferkorn's scurrilous fabrications about the Jews. Luther, who had his own disagreements with the Dominicans, though, chose to follow their path of narrow thinking. Indeed, he relied, in part, on Pfefferkorn's hate inspired lies about the Jews in his attempt to extinguish the religion towards the end of his lifetime.²⁹ Finally one ought to understand that with Luther's appearance on the scene there was a tendency by ecclesiastical authorities to confuse the opposition of the humanists to church abuses and intellectual stagnation, with the more forceful, political, economic, and nationalistic movement inspired by Luther. Overlooked, for instance, was the fact that the humanists and the adherents of Luther's movement had quickly developed a mutual antagonism. Reuchlin, as before, stood with the church and vehemently opposed Luther's efforts, as did Erasmus, though the latter was more reserved in his opposition. It was important for the two eyes of Germany, Erasmus and Reuchlin and other leading humanists such as Mutian, Crotus, and Pirckheimer, not to be confused with Luther's angry movement against the church. The reality, though, was that Reuchlin could not escape being connected with the reformation movement, no matter how strongly he protested. Pfefferkorn derisively wrote "du meinst, man habe jetzund mit Martinus Lauter so viel zu schaffen und zu schicken, daß mein deiner soll vergessen. Reuchlin ich sag dir und glaub mir das: Deiner wird nit vergessen"³⁰ (you think that one is so preoccupied with Luther that you will be forgotten. Reuchlin, I say to you and believe me, you will not be forgotten). The condemnation of the *Augenspiegel* by Pope Leo X in 1520 affirmed that assertion. In the end the *Talmud*, which according to Pfefferkorn and the Dominicans posed a threat to the Church was saved by the Pope. The Roman Church, as we know, did not survive the controversy intact.

²⁹ see for instance Luther's *Table Talks*. Luther proposed to forcibly convert all Jews in Germany to the Christian faith. If they refused then their houses and their synagogues were to be destroyed, and they were to be herded into cattle barns where they would be made to work by the sweat of their brows.

³⁰ Brod. *Reuchlin*. p. 270