

CHAPTER 3

Reuchlin and the Luther Affair

The *Letters of Obscure Men* provided a first conduit for the idea that the Reuchlin affair had been an overture to the Reformation controversy. In the 1520s, several of the humanists active on Reuchlin's behalf had become associated with Luther. Erasmus, Pirckheimer, Buschius, and Hutten had been mentioned repeatedly in the *Letters*. Soon after their publication, 'Erasmus laid the egg, and Luther hatched it,' became a popular witticism. Pirckheimer's name had been appended to the papal bull condemning Luther, formally identifying him as one of the reformer's adherents. Buschius had turned provocateur, openly defying church law by taking part in a meal featuring dishes of meat during Lent. Hutten was one of the most aggressive promoters of the Reformation, engaging in terrorist-style attacks on the Catholic clergy and encouraging Sickingen to declare war on the church. These developments led to a reinterpretation of the Reuchlin affair. The *Letters of Obscure Men* merely implied a link between Reuchlin and Luther; the private correspondence of their contemporaries soon made this link explicit. Christoph Scheurl, legal advisor to the city of Nürnberg, was among those who made the connection, warning Luther's opponents that they would be challenged in turn, not only by the followers of Luther but also by 'all Reuchlinists.'¹ Willibald Pirckheimer placed Reuchlin in a line-up together with Luther, Erasmus, and the French biblical humanist Jacques Lefèvre, depicting all four as victims of the scholastic theologians.² The Swiss humanist Melchior Vadianus likewise grouped Reuchlin together with Erasmus and Luther, explaining that they were attacked by the theologians 'because they speak rather freely.'³ Such testimonies were reinforced by pictorial representations.