

## CHAPTER 4

# Sixteenth-Century Interpretations of the Reuchlin Affair: Beliefs or Constructs?

Sixteenth-century writers offer a variety of interpretations of the Reuchlin affair, but are they spontaneous expressions of opinion or artificial constructs serving a strategic purpose? In its first stages, the Reuchlin affair was depicted as a campaign against Judaism. This interpretation was promoted by Pfefferkorn; it also forms the basis of Hoogstraten's indictment and of the condemnations of Reuchlin's *Eye Mirror* by a number of universities. This corporate understanding of the Reuchlin affair reflects the pervasive Christian bias of European society at the time. The same bias provided the rationalization for the wars against the Ottoman Turks, the subjugation of American natives, the expulsion of Jews and Muslims, and the numerous inquisitorial proceedings guarding and enforcing Christian doctrine, morality, and practices. In that sense the Reuchlin affair was business as usual and constitutes the unexamined and unreflective perpetuation of long-standing traditions. For Pfefferkorn, however, the battle against non-Christian values was not a tradition 'sucked ... into the bottom of our hearts, even with our mother's milk,' as Tyndale put it.<sup>1</sup> It was not the result of unremarked cultural assimilation to which every member of a given society is subject. On the contrary, it constituted a break with his native tradition and a conscious adoption of alien values. Indeed, Pfefferkorn's emphasis on the anti-Judaic angle of his conflict with Reuchlin serves a personal goal: it supports his efforts to refashion his persona and prove himself a genuine Christian. In adopting a polemical stance, he displays an attitude characteristic of the convert struggling to establish his new identity. His life was a 'life lived as a project,' as Stephen Greenblatt says in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*.<sup>2</sup>