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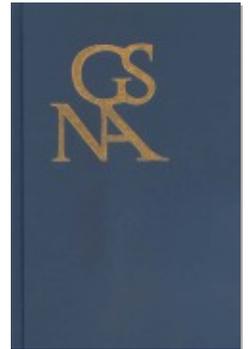
Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust (review)

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der Weg zur Entschlüsselung" (325–27) that describes how one can follow the witch's apparent mumbo-jumbo to arrange a so-called "magic quadrant" whose total amounts to fifteen, regardless of whether one counts any three successive numbers horizontally, vertically, or diagonally. In other words—the contents of the 2005 *Goethe-Jahrbuch* add up quite well!

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J. M. van der Laan, *Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust*. London: Continuum, 2007. 202 pp.

Faust lives on, as J. M. van der Laan demonstrates in this monograph that sweeps through the ages from antiquity to postmodernity with a breath-taking audacity not unlike Goethe's own claim to bridge three thousand years in his play. The book first surveys Faustian themes and formats from the earliest chap-book versions to the wealth of literary manifestations, cinematic and musical renditions, and multi-media events. With that context in place, van der Laan then launches an insightful study of Goethe's two-part tragedy highlighting the tensions of the text in ethical and scientific terms alike. He demonstrates that Goethe's *Faust* goes head-on into debates that still—or, perhaps, even more so—resonate today in the early twenty-first century. These include such issues as the ethical and practical implications of our quest for knowledge, including whether technology is our magical savior or our destructive master, and, whether the "control" of nature is the human domain or our environmental demise. The play's intense offerings lie in its resemblance to the universe: the *Faust* texts "constitute just such a system [like Stuart Kauffman's chaotic molecules that develop into complexity], a site at the edge of chaos where order and disorder, stasis and dynamism, consistence and inconsistency meet and interact" (127). Even as van der Laan demonstrates the *scientific* potential of this play that inspired such thinkers as those who developed chaos theory, Mitchell Feigenbaum and Albert Libchaber, he also clarifies that *Faust* simultaneously reveals the potential terror and exploitation of the applications of scientific knowledge in *technology*: "Only in the technological experience does Faust find meaning and satisfaction, but what he actually achieves once again is not true, but what can only be called false, meaning. After all, the story closes with Faust lost in illusion. What meaning does he actually find?" (106). Van der Laan continues with the problem of the Faustian illusion by suggesting that we, like Faust, may pursue knowledge yet actually determine far less than we believe. This he formulates both in the theological terms of good works versus divine grace, but also via complexity theory's exploration of order and chaos in the universe. With typical deftness, van der Laan suggests that Faust's final "delusion" is his belief of control over that which actually has us trapped in violent dependency: "[W]e belong to an age utterly enamored of and dependent on our technologies, [and] [e]ven the seemingly most benign technological intervention involves power and domination" (108). Looking thus at meaning and the reverberations of the quest to find it, van der Laan has written a book that contributes much to the large spectrum of recent work exploring Goethe's thought in relation to contemporary science. Yet he also simultaneously includes ethical considerations often left out of many analyses of the exciting parallels in *Faust* to chaos and complexity theory. Goethe's scientific insights put him ahead of his time, yet they do not, according to van der Laan, overshadow Faust's responsibilities or lack thereof. This combination of chaos theory and ethical questions

in one monograph makes *Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust* stand out as exemplary even in the wealth of *Faust* scholarship.

Additionally, van der Laan's work participates in the analyses emphasizing the play's irony and ambiguity rather than reading it as either a warning tale or a model of modernity. Beyond the ironies resulting from the science/technology tension, he also addresses how Faust's endless quest to grasp order and meaning in the universe, or to know "the mind of God," is itself ridden with irony. Faust rejects human reason and religious faith, for example, even while he assumes—*believes*—that he could somehow know the "unseen ultimate reality": Faust "concludes that he is unable to know or believe anything. Paradoxically, he continues to *believe* that he can *know*, even though he has rejected both knowledge and faith. . . . Ironically, he has no faith except in the reality of a knowledge he cannot possess" (54). Van der Laan repeatedly highlights these tensions, noting also that Faust's apparent self-assertion may be a mere shadow of his actual dependencies: "In *Faust*, the scenes following his death reveal that the great, independent, and powerful individual is *not* the author of his own salvation, but is rather a dependent creature, if not on God, on love and on grace. . . . It is a most unsatisfactory and unacceptable conclusion for those who claim to be in control of their lives and destinies" (149).

Finally, van der Laan outlines the ironies not only inherent in the play itself but also surrounding the two-hundred-year scholarship that posits Faust as everything from the *Übermensch* or model of German ingenuity to the harbinger of the technological horrors of modernity. The quest to attribute meaning to Goethe's *Faust* itself resembles Faust's own search and it follows similarly paradoxical and troubling paths. While "meaning" may "appear naive and benighted or worse banal and trite," van der Laan still concludes, "Nevertheless, *meaning* is what *Faust* is all about. The absence of meaning is the source of Faust's immeasurable frustration and unceasing dissatisfaction with life. . . . Even as Faust seeks meaning, we seek to give meaning to *Faust*" (160). Fulfillment of both, according to van der Laan, can come only when we recognize that "It all depends. . ." (142). This is a fine book, one of great interest to Goethe scholars, *Faust* experts, and those seeking an introduction to the breadth of Faustian themes.

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Lorna Fitzsimmons, ed., *International Faust Studies: Adaptation, Reception, Translation*. London: Continuum, 2008. ix + 299 pp.

The challenge of Goethe's *Faust*, writes Jane K. Brown, is not its "resistance to interpretation, but rather its incorrigible responsiveness to any question posed to it" (4). Lorna Fitzsimmons quotes Brown in her introduction to underline the enduring power of Faust to resonate with people, and in turn to provoke a wide and diverse variety of responses. These range over literature, art, music, and other performance media, and across national and cultural borders. With this in mind, Fitzsimmons brings together fifteen essays by a number of well-known scholars, not only in literary fields, but performance media in a global context. The result is a stimulating survey of contemporary work in Faust studies, especially in areas that have otherwise often been neglected or marginalized. Fitzsimmons divides the essays into five broad categories.

The first part, "Anteriorities," groups two essays that explore two neglected sources of material that contribute to *Faust*. Arnd Bohm focuses on the figure