



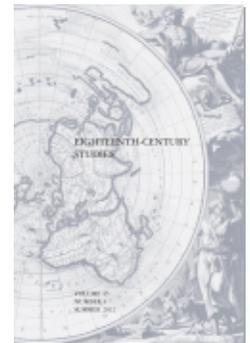
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Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [ *Elective Affinities* ]: A  
Scholarly Bicentennial

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(Review)



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dealt with here plus Frances Brooke and Frances Sheridan, who also operated in the London-centered literary networks of the 1750s. She points out that with the exception of Sheridan, none of these women had children to care for; all of them needed to earn money to live; four of them tried to write for the stage; and all participated in the literary life of London. She then proceeds to trace a fascinating web of interconnections and friendships among them and the various publishers, writers, and patrons in the literary world through letters and dedications, subscription lists, and memoirs and journals. She also notes their class status and the social meaning of their geographical addresses in order to place them in that world. The networking patterns she discloses “reveal an informal, professional, and cordial set of relations dependent on urban proximity, whereby individuals might meet accidentally in a printer’s shop, send one another complimentary copies of new publications, make an introduction to an aristocrat who fancied himself a patron, or mention a translation possibility recently discussed at a bookseller friend’s” (253). This vivid and porous world began to break down in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, as class divisions hardened and separated writers, patrons, and men of literary business. Schellenberg posits that the more open world of the 1750s was, in fact, productive for women and that rigidifying social lines closed down their opportunities to participate in these networks.

Indeed, Schellenberg’s essay summarizes for both books the clamping down on women’s literary reputations and opportunities that happened with the professionalization of literary life and the transformation of the fluid London scene of the 1750s into more exclusive “self-enclosed sub-communities at the end of the century” (254). These books provide much food for thought about individual texts, particular writers, literary history, and the contribution of gender to the eighteenth-century novel.

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**Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*]: A Scholarly Bicentennial**

Helmut Hühn, ed. *Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften”: Werk und Forschung* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2010). Pp. ix + 538. €149.95 / \$210.00.

Peter J. Schwartz, *After Jena: Goethe’s “Elective Affinities” and the End of the Old Regime* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2010). Pp. 358. \$75.00.

Two hundred years after its original publication in October 1809, the novel Goethe called his “best,” *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*], has lost none of its power to fascinate and mystify its readers and critics, tempting them to add to the long string of commentaries that has made it the most interpreted novel in German literature. It is therefore hardly surprising that the *Wahlverwandtschaften*’s bicentennial has been marked by the publication of important critical studies on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften,”* the Walter de Gruyter volume edited by Helmut Hühn, is the published outcome of a research project conducted at

the University of Jena, which celebrated the bicentennial with a literary exhibit, a lecture series, scholarly symposia, and a public reading of the novel by prominent stage actors. Interdisciplinary openness is the trademark of this volume, whose contributors include philosophers, historians, art historians, and scientists along with German literary scholars. The editor's stated goal is to offer a multiplicity of critical perspectives rather than a comprehensive interpretation, with such a diverse and finite approach being warranted by the diegetic plurality of the narrative itself (168). Nevertheless, this volume presents a radical departure from the more esoteric, mythical, allegorical, or deconstructive text exegeses of past decades, which, under the spell of Walter Benjamin's famous interpretation, often sacrificed surface analysis to the exploration of the subtexts of Goethe's most enigmatic novel. The fact that so many of the contributions focus on character psychology makes this volume both a refreshing reading experience and a welcome pedagogical tool.

In his brilliant opening, Ernst Osterkamp deflates the paradigm of moral renunciation by discussing the protagonists' mental isolation and failed sociability as hallmarks of the novel's modernity. Hermann Beland applies his psychoanalytical expertise to a fascinating diagnosis of the characters' psychotic mental tendencies. Benigna Carolin Kasztner calls on Kant's physiopsychical definition of the "Krankheiten des Kopfes" [illnesses of the head] to show how Eduard and Ottilie's symmetrical headaches signal a rupture between individual and social needs, while Birgit Sandkaulen explains the relevance of Spinoza's concept of "imaginatio" to Goethe's narrative of imaginary entanglement, a philosophical line of criticism continued in Temilo van Zantwijk's indictment of the autism of the four "singles." On a parallel path, Susan Baumert's analysis of narrative time shows how psychological time undermines its empirical linearity, whereas Michael Maurer illustrates the protagonists' disconnection from their historical context in the prevalence of ("botched") birthday celebrations. How all the characters are immersed in a wave of hastiness, trendiness, and inattention to the present is also emphasized in Elisabeth von Thadden's closing remarks.

A second group of essays focuses on the novel's intermedial aesthetics. In his critique of poststructuralist readings of *Elective Affinities* as an antihermeneutic manifesto, Jan Urbich argues that the novel demonstrates the mimetic power of signs, rather than their meaninglessness. With references to the folding pictures in Humphry Repton's theory of landscape gardening, Reinhard Wegner highlights the novelist's focus on the tension between illusion and reality. Multiple contemporary influences by, or on, garden and architectural design are the subject matter of Harald Tausch's elaborate demonstration.

A third group of essays centers on social history in the narrower sense of the term. Marko Kreutzmann shows how the novel deconstructs Adam Müller's romantic idealization of the landed aristocracy; Gerhard Müller links the figure of the "Captain" to the bureaucratic reforms in the wake of the French occupation, typified by the Prussian officer de Müffling; and Nicole Grochowina connects Eduard and Charlotte's marital crisis to the contemporary upsurge in divorce proceedings in the dukedom of Weimar-Saxony. Other more diverse contributions discuss Ottilie's maxims (Andreas Grimm); the novel's literary relations to Goethe's *Pandora* (Jochen Golz), Wieland's *Freundschaft und Liebe auf der Probe* (Klaus Manger), Schelling's philosophy of nature (Olaf Breidbach), and to the contemporary revolution in chemistry (Stefan Blechschmidt); the author's steering of the novel's reception (Jutta Heinz); and its thematic transformations in Handke's, Walser's, and Wellershoff's contemporary narratives (Nikolas Immer).

Altogether, this bicentennial volume presents an impressive achievement that does justice to its interdisciplinary scope. Whether the editorial policy of inclusiveness resulting in a collection of twenty-two essays, with a total text length of 488 pages, best serves the goal of an undertaking dedicated to illustrating *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*'s enduring appeal, is a question that this reviewer leaves up to other readers' judgment. Suffice it to say here that a distribution of the contributions along clearer thematic subject lines, as undertaken in this overview, would have made the collection more reader friendly and augmented its scholarly impact. Notwithstanding, Helmut Hühn's thick volume is so rich in provoking insights that researchers and teachers of Goethe's novel must make room for it in their libraries.

Peter J. Schwartz's *After Jena*, the first volume in the New Studies in the Age of Goethe series sponsored by the Goethe Society of North America, fulfills its aims well, since it is a study in historical contextualization. Buttressed by an impressive range of German and French historical studies and thorough archival research, Schwartz is unapologetic about holding up his work's sociohistorical focus against less time-specific interpretations of Goethe's novel of marriage and passion, which have highlighted its moral, metaphysical, or mythical dimensions, or such single aspects of its historicity as Goethe's science, landscape design, social interaction, or its relation to classical or romantic aesthetics. In this sense, Schwartz's study serves as both counterpart and complement to Helmut Hühn's essay collection.

Reading *Elective Affinities* as a "reflex" of its time, Schwartz traces the text's political, social, economic, and legal linkages to the historic changes ushered in by Napoleon's dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire and his imposition of the Civil Code on much of Central Europe after the Prussian defeats at Jena and Auerstedt. While the author's sociohistorical interpretive framework follows in the footsteps of Hans-Rudolf Vaget's 1980 essay on Eduard as an aristocratic landowner, his monograph adds and combines several qualities that give his approach a novel flavor. Its critical vantage point proceeds from Goethe's welcoming of Napoleon's Civil Code as a "harbinger of modernity" (67), implemented in his sudden wedding to Christiane Vulpius after the battle of Jena, his legitimization of their son August, and his request for full proprietary rights to the "Haus am Frauenplan." In such a legal context, the novel's portrayal of Eduard's costly mismanagement of his estate exemplifies the crisis of sociopolitical legitimacy faced by aristocrats in the new era of modernized land administration. Schwartz is also innovative in his utilization of the "habitus" theory of Marcel Mauss and Pierre Bourdieu to analyze the protagonists' sociological specificity.

Paradoxically, Schwartz's historical analysis is more convincing in its more esoteric aspects: for example, when the author links Goethe's interest in numismatics and their allegorical iconography to a demonstration of the emblematic function of some of the novel's leitmotifs (rudderless boats, star, comet) as negative foils for the numismatic emblems of Tyche/Fortuna, Nike/Victoria, and Kairos/Occasio used to legitimate Napoleonic conquests. In this light, the famous image of the falling star over Eduard's and Ottilie's heads takes on an unexpected new meaning as an inversion of the allegory of good fortune on imperial coinage. Schwartz's sociopolitical analysis is also most incisive when linking Eduard's failings as an aristocrat—his dilettantism, fatalism, and lack of timing—to the protagonist's implicit function as a negative foil for Napoleon. On the other hand, the sociopolitical focus of his interpretation is less apt at capturing the polyvalence of Goethe's main character Ottilie, relying on existing interpretive paradigms, ethical, aesthetic, or poetological.

Caveat aside, Peter Schwartz's monograph can lay claim to an important place in *Elective Affinities* scholarship for its impressive command of both the historical and critical fields, its integration of historical context into the novel's plot and characters, and its precise and incisive, often quite compelling prose. Students and scholars of the literature and history of the period, including nonreaders of German, will also appreciate the study's carefully compiled critical apparatus, renewing their curiosity for exploring Goethe's original.

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### An Age of Ingenuity

Minsoo Kang, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines: The Automaton in the European Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). Pp. 386. \$39.95.

Celina Fox, *The Arts of Industry in the Age of Enlightenment* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Pp. 576. \$95.00.

On 11 February 1738, a new exhibit opened at the Hôtel de Longueville in Paris. In a magnificent room ornamented with mirrored panels and frescoes over the doors, a young mechanic from Grenoble named Jacques de Vaucanson entertained visitors with a life-size automaton he had constructed, which simulated a man playing the flute. Vaucanson's automaton was different from previous curiosities of its kind because the fourteen tunes it played did not come from a music box inside the machine, but were actually produced by the movements of the flute player's fingers in combination with the air generated by bellows in its chest. It was a huge success both with the public and the scientific establishment, garnering the approval of the Académie Royale des Sciences and the enthusiastic admiration of Diderot, who later included a long description of it in the entry on "Android" in the first volume of the *Encyclopédie*. In 1739, Vaucanson added two more automata to his exhibit: a pipe-and-drum player and what became his most famous invention—a duck that appeared to eat grain, swallowing and digesting it before expelling it as excrement from its rear. The three figures were later sold and taken on a tour of Europe, appearing first at the Haymarket Opera House in London in 1742, then later in Holland, Germany, and eventually Russia.

What was the fascination of these machines and those like them in the eighteenth century? Minsoo Kang offers two explanations in his ambitious and enjoyable book, *Sublime Dreams of Living Machines*—one anthropological and one historical. His first explanation, developed in a provocative opening chapter, is that human beings have always been fascinated by objects that challenge the binary categories with which they make sense of their world and order their societies. The automaton, Kang argues, "is the ultimate categorical anomaly"—an artificial, inanimate object that appears to be a living being made of flesh and blood, and a representation that also seems to have crossed over into the world of the represented: "its very nature is a series of contradictions, and its purpose is to flaunt its own insoluble paradox" (36). For Kang, the transgressive "liminality" of