Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance by Dag Nikolaus Hasse (review)

Craig Martin

Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Volume 48, Number 2, Autumn 2017, pp. 251-253 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press

(1615). Similar case studies, however, might have followed the telescope to Isfahan (1612?), Hirado (1613), Brazil (1614), Peru (1615), Jahangir (1615), Sumatra (1619), Bermuda (1620), Havana (1626), Istanbul (1631), Haiti (1635), Cairo (1635), and other destinations. Granted, some of these iterations were maritime, not astronomical, telescopes, but the point still holds that Europe is not an adequate framework within which to analyze an instrument that changed the very nature of space and earth's place in the universe.

Nick Wilding
Georgia State University

Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance. By Dag Nikolaus Hasse (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2016) 660 pp. $59.95

In this admirable study, Hasse demonstrates the significant position of Arabic writings among Renaissance philosophers, physicians, astrologers, and scholars. He targets the belief that Renaissance humanism's turn to antiquity entailed the wholesale rejection of Avicenna, Averroes, Mesue, Rhazes, and other luminaries of the Arabic medieval tradition, who were attacked for their supposedly barbarous prose and their deviations from classical authorities. Despite humanists' anti-Arabic polemics and ecclesiastical attempts at suppression, Italians who were associated with universities readily printed and translated Arabic works, incorporating them into understandings of medicine and nature. Hasse, going beyond the rhetoric of Renaissance authors, is more concerned with what they did with their sources than what they said that they did with them. Accordingly, he finds that anti-Arabic purists' calls for the Hellenization of knowledge were impractical and, despite their proliferation in the 1520s and 1530s, went largely unheeded.

The volume is valuable in numerous ways. The research is profound, based on extensive philological, philosophical, and historical analyses. The argumentation is sober yet revelatory. The appendix, which lists Renaissance Latin editions of Arabic natural philosophical, astrological, and medicinal works, is an indispensable research tool. The book proceeds through comparative diachronic analysis based on case studies of Renaissance discussions of biography, translation, botany, philosophy, and astrology.

The biographical tradition about Avicenna reveals that attempts to improve historical accuracy were impeded by a lack of reliable Arabic sources (Leo Africanus' *De viris illustribus* [c. 1527] is not an entirely trustworthy source) and shifts to humanist histories more concerned with establishing chronology than recounting lives. Hasse's examination of Renaissance translations shows that scholars applied humanistic philological techniques to the writings of Arabic authors with mixed results.

Andrea Alpago's revised translation of 1527, based on Arabic manuscripts, made small improvements to Gerard of Cremona's twelfth-century Latin translation of Avicenna's *Canon* (c. 1025). Yet, the philological acumen of medieval translators, like Gerard, still compares favorably to many of the new attempts.

In the field of medical botany, Renaissance discussions of the plant senna, still used as a laxative, demonstrate the failings of those who desired to trace all knowledge back to the Greeks. Pietro Andrea Mattioli, in his 1565 commentary on Dioscorides' *De materia medica*, rightly chastised Jean Ruel for misidentifying senna in his 1536 *De natura stirpium* in an attempt to make it correspond with a plant known by the Greeks. To the contrary, Mattioli highlighted the usefulness of the *Opera* of Ps.-Mesue (probably compiled in the thirteenth century), which provided better pharmacological information than did humanists, who were intent on dropping Arabic sources.

Averroes' notorious position, in his *Long Commentary on the De anima* (second half of the twelfth century), regarding the unicity of the material intellect was widespread among Northern Italian philosophers. Despite ecclesiastical attempts at suppression beginning in the 1480s, it died a slow death; no one openly promoted the unicity thesis after the 1560s. Nevertheless, Averroes' commentaries remained central to interpreting Aristotle for decades thereafter. Finally, Renaissance reformers of astrology, relying on Ptolemy and a skewed image of ancient practice, rejected some forms of prognostication associated with Arabic writings but had little effect on the doctrine of great conjunctions, which Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had attacked in his *Disputationes adversus astrologiam divinatricem* (posthumously printed in 1504). In fact, the use of great conjunctions flourished in the seventeenth-century astrological histories of Johannes Kepler, contained in his *De trigono igneo* (1606) and *Epitome astronomiae Copernicanae* (1618), and of Giovanni Battista Riccioli, found in his *Almagestum novum astronomiam veterm novamque complectens* (1651), among other works.

Proceeding through these case studies has the merit of unfolding the fine details in the debates surrounding Arabic writings. The risk of case studies is in offering exceptional rather than typical examples. Hasse's choice to analyze the influence of Averroes' theory of the unicity of the material intellect may not be the best one to show his centrality to the Renaissance thought. This theory, along with the eternity of the universe, were the only doctrines of Averroes that were censured by the Fifth Lateran Council (1513). Emphasis on the fate of this doctrine, which was besieged by ecclesiastical attacks, potentially skews the understanding of his legacy, as Averroes remained influential in many ways even after philosophers discarded his understanding of the material intellect. A case study of a less controversial teaching might reveal an even greater role for Averroes' thought. His theory of mixtures was endorsed throughout the sixteenth century. Moreover, early seventeenth-century opponents, such as Daniel Sennert, adopted a version of Avicenna's theory in its place.

Hasse's view that Renaissance scholars not only used but also revived Arabic learning to a certain degree is convincing. Readers of this volume will be forced to reject the view that Renaissance thought transformed solely from an engagement with classical antiquity or through the discovery of ancient texts. Champions of Renaissance humanism must now also recognize its limitations and the darker sides of its ideology of linguistic and cultural purism.

Craig Martin
Oakland University

Agricultural Enlightenment: Knowledge, Technology, and Nature, 1750–1840. By Peter M. Jones (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016) 268 pp. $100.00

There have been surprisingly few attempts to draw out the connections between the Enlightenment and the contemporaneous transformation of agriculture. In an important new book that seeks to remedy this situation, Jones suggests that, in the light of the currently dominant conception of the Enlightenment as a purely intellectual movement, his project might be regarded as "somewhat unusual, perhaps even perverse" (5). But as he rightly points out, the majority of Enlightenment figures did not see their work in that way. Equally important, from the perspective of this journal, the world of knowledge that they inhabited had not yet been divided into a series of arbitrarily defined disciplines. To take only the most obvious example, the political economy associated with Adam Smith is not "economics" as currently practiced (whether or not we consider it a "science"); it also contains elements of what would now be included in economic history, social geography, politics, and even psychology. Part of Jones' achievement in this book is therefore to recreate the "pre-disciplinary" eighteenth-century world through an "interdisciplinarity" capable of encompassing theoretical debates about, say, physiocracy (17–20), as well as the seemingly more germane contribution of animal manure to soil fertility (181–184).

Agricultural Enlightenment does not claim to be a total history of the Enlightenment in the manner of Israel's recent work.[1] Rather, as the title and organizing principle ("research paradigm") suggest, it seeks to understand it as something in the way of a social movement, albeit a diffuse one, intent on changing agrarian practice. For those who were enlightened, this orientation involved "a concern for attainable, incremental improvements in day-to-day conditions of living" that also opened up potential benefits for states: "Governments interpreted the phenomenon of Enlightenment as both an opportunity for and as a guide to the

1 See, for example, Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750* (New York, 2002); *idem*, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, 2011).