

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

September 26, 2017

Dag Nikolaus Hasse, *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance*, Harvard University Press, 2016, 688pp., \$59.95 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780674971585.

Few questions have inspired historians studying the interactions between the pre-modern Muslim world and Europe with quite as much passion as that of translation and its influence. Marc Bloch warned us that historians all too readily revert to worshipping at the idol of origins when it comes to assigning significance to religious or political institutions instead of parsing why each generation chooses to continue believing what it does—in Bloch’s opinion we would do better to heed “the old Arab proverb...‘Men resemble their times more than they do their fathers.’”¹ We should be similarly wary of limiting our study of the translation movements that linked Christendom and Islamdom in the Middle Ages to the moments of transmission themselves, understandable though such a focus might be. The elite and state sponsored translation of largely but not only Greek works by largely but not only Christian scholars employed by Muslim patrons into Arabic in the eighth and ninth centuries in Baghdad was the first of these moments. The second was the translation of Arabic texts into Latin by Christian and Jewish scholars with often uncredited Muslim assistance in Iberia and southern Italy from the eleventh to the thirteenth century. The story that Dag Nikolaus Hasse tells in *Success and Suppression* is of a third and less discussed translation movement in Europe that took place between 1400 and 1650 and which involved the retranslation of works previously translated in the Middle Ages along previously untranslated works, some of them translated into Latin from Hebrew translations of Arabic texts. This third movement was closely related to Humanism, the productive as well as violent philological return to Greek and Latin sources that characterized much of the Renaissance’s cultural impetus, but which, as characterized by previous scholarship, set Humanists against Arabists in early modern Europe in an argument over the status and reliability of Arabic scholarship. In providing us with the most comprehensive depiction yet of Renaissance translations of Arabic scholarship, Hasse nuances the narrative of Humanist vs. Arabist opposition, and draws a complicated picture of the myriad ways in which Arabic scholarship lived on after translation in fifteenth to seventeenth century Europe. In doing so, he gives a quantitative overview of the number and location of printed editions of Latin translations and then focuses on their subsequent significance, especially in the fields of medicine, philosophy, and astrology, in all of which Arabic scholarship proved to be controversial (xv). The second part of the book is composed of a lengthy (ninety pages) appendix giving biographical sketches

¹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft* (New York: Vintage Books, 1953), 35.

of forty-four of the Arabic authors translated along with lists of when their works were printed in Latin (in itself this appendix is wonderful resource—see especially the entries on Averroes [341-357] and Avicenna [357-364]). The overall result is impressive, even if it is not always easily accessible, and goes far beyond the translations themselves to their complicated afterlives in Renaissance scholarship.

Success and Suppression is divided into two main parts, the first entitled “The Presence of Arabic Traditions,” and the second “Greeks versus Arabs,” each of which has three chapters, followed by a seventh chapter as a conclusion. The first part gives an overview of what Renaissance Europeans knew of Arabic scholarship—Hasse uses the adjective “Arabic” here to refer to all scholarship written in Arabic regardless of the author’s own ethnicity—and describes the nature of the Renaissance translations. Here he begins in Chapter One (“Introductions, Editions, and Curricula”) by distinguishing the Renaissance translations from their Medieval predecessors, some of whom, such as the twelfth century Dominicus Gundisalvi, a canon in Toledo, were almost forgotten three centuries later (4). Other aspects of the Medieval translation movement were misremembered as well, with the thirteenth century court-sponsored translation efforts of Alfonso X and Frederick the Great receiving unwarranted credit for twelfth century translations (6). The Renaissance efforts at translation and the basis for the later appendix are summarized in Table 1, where the number of editions or Arabic works translated into Latin and printed before 1700 are given (Venice, Lyon, and Basel being the centers of Arabic printing). Four names stand out, being the ones that any educated person of the time would have known: Averroes (with 114 editions of various works), Avicenna (78), Mesue (72), and Rhazes (67) (7-9). Two things are perhaps particularly striking in this list: the near complete absence of Avicenna’s philosophical works—quite popular among European readers in the Middle Ages—opposed to his popular medical writings, and the prominence of Mesue—the Latin name of the works attributed to the ninth Yūḥannā ibn Māsawayh as well an anonymous eleventh-twelfth century author who wrote under Ibn Māsawayh’s name—whose writings were translated in the Middle Ages but only came to prominence during the Renaissance (10, 391-396). In surveying the transition from Medieval commentaries on Arabic works to the age of print, Hasse stresses the ways in which Humanist authors built upon and continued the Medieval commentary culture. The Renaissance itself was partially defined by this engagement with Arabic scholarship, which was directly tied to the university curricula of the day in which few Christian scholars were read. Instead, students across Europe read Galen and Avicenna on medicine, Aristotle and Averroes on philosophy, and Ptolemy, Alcabitus, and Albumasar on astrology (17, 26). This was an intellectual moment that was changing by the end of the seventeenth century, and by the middle of the eighteenth century Avicenna, for example, was hardly taught in European universities anymore.

Alongside printing and teaching Arabic works, Renaissance scholars departed from their Medieval predecessors by including Arabic scholars in their bio-biographical works. In Chapter Two (“Bio-Biography: A Canon of Learned Men”), Hasse surveys the biographical writings of scholars from Jacopo Filippo Foresti da Bergamo (1434-1520), Hartmann Schedel (1440-1514), Symphorien Champier (1471-1538), Leo Africanus (ca. 1494-ca. 1554) to Bernardino Baldi (1553-1617). Much of this scholarship was characterized by a weak grasp of Islamic history that didn’t change substantively until the seventeenth century study by Golius (1596-1667) of the bio-bibliographical work of Ibn Khallikan (1211-1282), and Pocock’s (1604-1691) translation of Barhebraeus’s (1226-1286) history of the Arabs (65). Thus, we find the widespread belief that all Arabic authors were from al-Andalus, and the fanciful notion that Averroes (Ibn Rushd [1126-1198]) had been a contemporary of

Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā [980-1037]) and had poisoned him while the latter was King of Cordoba (32, 35, 67). Unsurprisingly, Leo Africanus's contribution to this literature, dating from the 1520s, was more accurate and included the theory that the Latin tradition's understanding of Avicenna was based on Gerard of Cremona's (1114-1187) mistranslation of *ra'is* (as in Ibn Sina being the leader of the philosophers) as *princeps* or Prince (even with his Muslim North African background, however, Leo Africanus was poorly informed about Avicenna's life (50). Why, on the other hand, Renaissance authors placed Avicenna (or al-Ghazālī for that matter) in Iberia, remains unclear, as does the reason for Leo Africanus' biographical work being ignored by his contemporaries, while his description of Africa achieved substantial popularity (52). Hasse notes that this biographical tradition was separate from that of medical Humanism, where Arabic authors would never have been listed since illustrious men of prior generations were held up as models of imitation; instead, this body of work stressed the progression of knowledge—opposed to a Humanist excavation of the past for truth—of which the Arabs were a part (68).

The third and longest chapter of Part One—"Philology: Translator's Programs and Techniques"—takes a close look at the Renaissance translations of Arabic works that included principally the Latin translation of Averroes's commentaries on Aristotle (19 of which had not been previously translated into Latin, and many of which were translated from Hebrew) and six whole or partial new translations of Avicenna's *Canon* (69). These translations were carried out between ca. 1480-1549 and reflect the Humanist preoccupation with philology and accuracy of the age, although their overall impact on Renaissance Europe as a whole is unclear (70). After providing a lengthy table as an overview of the time and place of these translations (72-75), Hasse presents a series of case studies of individual translations, providing close philological analyses of the texts and comparisons with prior Medieval translations where they exist. The first is Averroes's preface to book 12 of his Long Commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, which was translated four times in the Renaissance, twice by Elia del Medigo in the 1480s, in ca. 1511 by Paolo Ricci, and between 1520-1549 by Jacob Mantino. Subsequent examples include Abraham de Balmes (d. 1523) and Mantino's translations of Averroes's *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *Topics* and two retranslations of Avicenna's *Canon* by Girolamo Ramusio (d. 1486) and Andrew Alpago (d. 1522), both of whom worked in Damascus as physicians in the Venetian embassy (70, 96-97). Hasse's interest with these examples, as with the others that he surveys, lies in the choices made by individual translators and the degree to which they achieved accuracy and clarity as well as in the differences between the scholastic Latin of the Medieval translations—often painstakingly literal—and the Humanist Latin of the Renaissance that would often rework the text in order to represent what the translator understood was its overall point (95, 118, 129). Although these erudite close readings and parsing of specific word choices will doubtlessly be beyond the abilities of all of Hasse's readers to follow—my own poor Medieval Latin was decidedly not up to the task—these readings perform Hasse's aspiration to judge Renaissance engagement with Arabic materials not on the basis of what scholars said they were going to do, but on what they actually did. These careful philological efforts pay dividends when it comes to showing the diversity of Renaissance approaches to Arabic materials, and also for supporting his assertion that Humanist scholars in their philological aspirations contributed a great deal to Arabic translation during this period (130).

Hasse ends Part One of his book emphasizing the influence of Alpago's glossary of proper names that he appended to his translation of Avicenna's *Canon*, allowing him to transition from discussing the translation program of Renaissance translators to the controversies that emerged out of these translations. Part Two begins with Chapter Four,

“Materia Medica: Humanists on Laxatives,” and the anti-Arabic Humanist criticism that peaked between 1490-1530 and which faulted Arabic authors for their ignorance of Greek. These criticisms were linked to, in Italy, Nicòlo Leoniceno and his student Giovanni Manardo, in France Symphorien Champier, and, in Germany, Leonhart Fuchs (137). In keeping focus on what scholars did instead of what they said they were doing, Hasse turns to the Renaissance debate over a new plant that appeared in the literature on simple medicines, the laxative Senna (later identified in the seventeenth century at *Cassia acutifolia*, most likely coming to Europe from the Nile Delta)(139-40). Senna posed a problem to Humanist scholars, as it was unknown to Discorides and Greek scholarship. Some scholars, such as Jean Ruel (d. 1537), tried to identify Senna with *colutea*, a tree described only in the work of Theophrastus, and in doing so had to alter the description of Senna considerably (167). Others, however, such as Champier, who was generally opposed to drawing on Arabic scholarship, recognized implicitly that the Greeks had not known the plant and grudgingly turned to Arabic sources for information (150). As Hasse notes, Humanists found themselves in the same place earlier Arabic authors had been in the tenth century when after having translated Discorides into Arabic, they incorporated many names of medicines unknown to the Greeks into the genre of *materia medica* (173). After an initial half-century of resistance, Humanists did the same and Arabic scholarship remained prominent in the genre throughout the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth.

The second case study offered by Hasse is perhaps also the most well-known and deals with the reception of Averroes, the most widely quoted Arabic author in the Renaissance (179). Besides Humanist opposition to him due to his being Arab, Averroes’s teachings attracted opposition from members of the Church due his being identified with the unicity thesis (in which mankind shares one intellect, implying collective and not individual immortality) and Aristotle’s notion of an eternal universe (Averroes’s views on the soul differed depending on which commentary on *De Anima* one consulted [197]). This Church opposition to Averroes culminated in a Bull issued at the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513 that condemned the unicity thesis and its supporters. Who, then, were his supporters? Hasse deftly unpacks Averroism, defined as a belief in a series of psychological and philosophical tenets including the unicity thesis, but also the denial of God’s knowledge of particulars, and proceeds to counter the argument that Averroism chiefly existed in the minds of its critics (190-191, 241). He finds evidence of two groups of scholars, one in fourteenth century Bologna, and another in fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy (mainly Padua) that included Paul of Venice, Niccolò Tignosi, Nicoletto Vernia, Alessandro Achillini, Agostino Nifo, Luca Prassicio, Marcantonio Genua, Francesco Vimercato, and Antonio Bernardi, all of whom, at least at one time, subscribed to the unicity thesis, while also being aware of how it stood in tension with Catholic doctrine. Nicoletto Vernia (1420-1499) is an especially interesting figure here for after being criticized by Pietro Barozzi, the Bishop of Padua, in 1489, who threatened followers of the unicity thesis with excommunication, he recanted and published a treatise against Averroes in 1492 in which he nevertheless managed to include the unicity thesis by quoting Albertus Magnus (204). While other Averroists responded to the 1513 Bull by differentiating clearly between those of their views that were philosophical and those that were theological, the unicity thesis continued to enjoy widespread popularity in early sixteenth century Italy, not declining until the end of the century (217-225). Hasse explains this shift by the declining presence of Averroes in Italian university curricula in the second half of the sixteenth century, as well as the appearance of alternate theories of the intellect in the writings of thinkers like Philipp Melanchthon (d. 1560), Jacopo Zabarella (d.

1589), and Francisco Suarez (d. 1617) that preserved the individuality of the human intellect and the human soul (226-228).

Regardless of the popularity of Averroes's views, how accurate were they as expositions of Aristotle? Juan Luis Vives (d. 1540) took issue not so much with Averroes's own opinions as what he saw were his poor translations of Aristotle. In a philological tour de force, Hasse carefully traces Aristotle's Greek into the tenth century Arabic translation of Naẓīf al-Rūmī in order to evaluate the text that Averroes commented on, and then follows Averroes's commentary—in this case it is his *Long Commentary* on the *Metaphysics*—into the thirteenth century scholastic Latin of Michael Scott that formed the text criticized by Vives (230-234). The conclusion is that due to his knowledge of Greek and his ability to access Greek commentaries on Aristotle, Vives's understanding of Aristotle's text was superior to that of Averroes, but that he erroneously blamed Averroes for mistakes made by Naẓīf and that due to his broad understanding of Aristotle's thought, Averroes's commentary still preserved value (237-239). While Averroes was falsely criticized on philological grounds by Renaissance scholars such as Vives, Hasse is equally if not more concerned with demonstrating that Averroes's significance did not decline in Europe due to greater access to Aristotle's Greek commentaries, and remained significant in European scholarship and thought into the second half of the sixteenth century (244).

The final chapter of Part Two is entitled "Astrology: Ptolemy against the Arabs" and takes up the place of Arabic scholarship in the Renaissance in the highly popular field of astrology. As with the previous examples, Humanist opposition to Arabic thought was based on the contention that the Greeks—in this case Ptolemy—had said all that there was to say on a given issue. And while astrology remained controversial in many quarters, the debate was as much about what types of astrological claims were valid as it was about the discipline as a whole. In order to parse where and how Renaissance scholars incorporated Arabic scholarship on astrology, Hasse looks at both scholars who supported astrology such as Philipp Melanchthon, Girolamo Cardano, and Johannes Kepler as well as those such as Pico della Mirandola and Bernardino Telesio, who were critical of many aspects of it (while not rejecting it entirely) (248-249). The essential problem that Humanist scholars faced—as with the genre of *material medica*—was that Arabic scholarship had added considerably to the field of astrology. Thus, while Melanchthon may have attributed the destruction of the academy of Alexandria to the Arabs, and Pico della Mirandola argued for a return to a Ptolemaic astrology free of all Arabic influences, all standard Renaissance handbooks followed a structure based on Arabic works as there were huge gaps in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos* when it came to meeting the Medieval and Renaissance demands for astrological knowledge (252-256). To demonstrate the presence of Arabic scholarship, Hasse takes us into the details of the relevant field, showing how interrogations, elections, lots, annual revolutions and above all the theory of greater conjunctions relied heavily on Arabic scholarship (272). This doctrine, drawing principally on the works of Albumasar (Abū Ma'shar [d. 886]), on whose Renaissance afterlife see the Appendix (326-328), was based on the significance of Jupiter and Saturn passing each other roughly every 20 years and varying with regard to Aries, Sagittarius, and Leo when they did so, changing their "triplicity" every twelve cycles—resulting in a minor conjunction—and over 960 years returning to their initial relationship (275). The popularity of this theory survived the opposition of Pico della Mirandola and after critical reevaluation by Cardano and Kepler, found the actual number of years between Greater Conjunctions to be 794 and 800, respectively, numbers employed in some of the popular astrological histories that appeared between 1400-1650 (see the wonderful table on 280-281). Hasse closes this chapter reflecting on the irony that Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*—to

which the frustrated opponents of Arabic influence wished to return—was not representative of Greek astrology in the first place and the Arabic works were themselves more accurate representatives of Greek astrology as a whole.

In the book's conclusion, Hasse summarizes the overall role played by Arabic scholarship in the Renaissance, linking its prominence directly with the central role it played in university curricula during the sixteenth century (295). Importantly, this presence was not residue from the Middle Ages, but rooted in translations and debates from the Renaissance itself. The success and suppression of the book's title is a concise summation of the tensions surrounding Arabic scholarship that the book has charted, with Hasse noting that the Humanist attempt to purge knowledge of Arabic thought negatively impacted the development of medicine, philosophy, and astrology (313). Their opposition was not rooted in a type of early modern Islamophobia or in a fear of the Ottoman Empire but in the philological concerns about recovering the precise meaning of Greek works and in the presupposition of Greek philosophical superiority (Vives is here the exception that proves the rule [234]). Despite it, European scholars continued to draw on Arabic knowledge into the seventeenth century and beyond. Hasse concludes the book with an eloquent paragraph in which he makes the important observation that the Muslim world did not decline intellectually in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries, but that it was the European West that went through a massive transformation during this period that would propel it to world dominance, a process in which was influenced profoundly by an Arabic scholarly tradition that it would subsequently largely forget (314-315).

This is a rich, complex, and occasionally dense book that is clearly written and which demonstrates impressive erudition and scholarship. Anyone working on the intellectual history of Europe during the Renaissance and Early Modern period will find it rewarding if not essential. And yet, *caveat lector*, with the dozens of names that are often casually introduced and pages of careful philological scholarship that enact the author's aim of working from the particular to the general, it is not a good introduction to the subject and would be better approached after the reader has familiarized herself with the period in general. That no introductory works to this subject exist—requiring as they would a broad synthesis of a number of vibrant fields of study that have seen numerous developments in the last decades and that depend on knowledge of Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew—speaks both to the importance of *Success and Suppression* and to the difficulty the book may find in gaining the audience it deserves.

Justin Stearns
Associate Professor of Arab Crossroads Studies
New York University – Abu Dhabi

© 2017: Justin Stearns

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Stearns, Justin, Review of *Success and Suppression: Arabic Sciences and Philosophy in the Renaissance*, *SCTIW Review*, September 26, 2017. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1518>.

ISSN: 2374-9288