

Muhsin J. Al-Musawi, *The Medieval Islamic Republic of Letters: Arabic Knowledge and Construction* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 449 pp.

Two main interrelated themes run in the background of this work on Arab/Islamic cultural history. One is the theme of Pascale Casanova's book *The World Republic of Letters*: in Europe, Casanova argues, it was the broad and informal literary engagement by individual artists and writers in their respective vernaculars, as much as the formal and institutionalized efforts to confront a hegemonic Latin, that made for the establishment of a "republic of letters." The second theme comes from Theodor Adorno's critique of the tendency by "modernists" to look down upon and therefore fail to incorporate their cultural heritage as they set out to develop their own literary products, in effect making their "knowledge products" alien to their respective societies. Against these themes as background, two "common wisdoms" about Islamic/Arabic culture are challenged in the foreground of this well-documented and original work: the "orientalist" perspective that the Islamic cultural heyday collapsed with the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in 1258, and the "modernist" Arab perspective influenced by that claim, in effect holding that nothing of cultural value after that epoch is deserving of intellectual excavation.

In this book, however, a counterargument to all of these is cogently made: an Islamic republic of letters—its tangible expression, the collective and encyclopedic *Epistles* of the Brethren of Purity (functioning roughly as Diderot's *Encyclopaedia* did for the European Enlightenment)—extended well into the eighteenth century and was reflected in the unofficial public language of multiethnic poets, travelers, scribes, redactors, lexicographers, grammarians, and commentators, often discoursing and writing in their national languages—primarily Persian and Turkish—while retaining Arabic as the basic language of reference. Unlike the case in Europe, where the vernaculars' challenge to Latin underwrote expansion of the republic of letters, the case in the Islamic intellectual world was less involved with challenging classical Arabic than with the interaction of independent agents in public life, spanning all ethnic and national borders, that disseminated and reinvigorated literary canons.

The distinction that the author makes between an "unofficial public language"—the various "Arabics" used by street poets, Sufis, storytellers, performers, authors—and an official but rigid "religious language," as used, for example, by lawmakers and scholars, is key to his major argument. With this distinction in mind, the argument can be made that literary creativity throughout the Islamic world continued well beyond the fall of Baghdad, Mamelukan Cairo finally becoming a cultural mecca for an Islamic republic of letters. A further argument to corroborate this first one can be made that the rational sciences (whether

astronomy, law, or philosophy) continued developing, somewhat haphazardly, well into the seventeenth century. Even so, it may be stretching the argument beyond its bearing point to claim that an Islamic republic of letters spanning knowledge production as a whole, including the traditional sciences, continued into the eighteenth century. For the main argument in this book to work, one needs to disentangle the traditional sciences, with their formal “establishmentarian” language, from the “public” literary track and characterize the former as a rigid “religious language”—which indeed the author does. Doing so, however, is an injustice to the “traditional” disciplines (including law, science, and philosophy), since they continued to flourish in various Islamic regions until well into the seventeenth century, Mulla Sadra arguably being the last of the giants in that tradition. This one slight critique of an otherwise masterly treatment of the subject could easily be overcome by simply widening the scope of the study to include (and identify the distinctive temporal cap for) knowledge production in these rationalist disciplines.

Finally, the author argues that just as it is wrong to assume that an Islamic republic of letters reached its zenith and then collapsed (with an Andalusian exception) shortly after Baghdad’s fall, it has also been an intellectual failing of “modernist” Arab scholars, resulting in a negative dissonance between the intellectual and his or her society, to ignore the far-reaching and filtered extension of that heritage in the wider public sphere. The author well argues, à la Adorno (*Negative Dialectics*), that a proper appreciation of that heritage, and incorporation of those parts of it that are still very much alive among the masses, would establish the intellectual as part of his or her society, rather than leaving him or her on its ineffective margins.

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Eric Nelson, *The Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2014), 400 pp.

Of the making of post-Whig interpretations of history, there seems to be no end, less because there exist coherent opposites to a coherent “Whig interpretation” than because the meanings of such terms as *Whig* and *Tory*, both as they were and as they are now used, are seen to have changed and be still changing in so many ways. In this brilliant study, Eric Nelson takes up the implications of Lord North’s remark that the American claim to be responsive to the authority of the Crown of Great Britain but not to that of Parliament was a “Tory” argument and shows it to have been not only antiparliamentarian but also radically monarchist