

Le De anima alchimique du pseudo-Avicenne by Sébastien Moureau

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“Sciant artifices alkimie species metallorum transmutari non posse”.¹ Ibn Sīnā’s (Lat. Avicenna’s) famous and trenchant judgment on the impossibility of alchemical transmutation was at the center of a lively debate among Latin medieval thinkers, even more so since the section of Avicenna’s *Kitāb al-Shifā’* (The Book of Healing) that it originally belonged to was transmitted as the fourth book of Aristotle’s *Meteorologica* in the Latin world, with all the weight of authority that this implied. Nevertheless, the relationship between Avicenna’s name and alchemy is much more nuanced: authentic works by Avicenna show that his position towards alchemy was possibly less strict than the famous Latin sentence may lead us to believe, and treatises of debated authenticity—like the *Risālat al-Iksīr* (Lat. *Avicenna ad Hasen regem epistola de re tecta*)—appear to accept the possibility of metallic transmutation, which implied the elimination of the *differentia specifica* of metals. What is certain is that Avicenna was considered an authority by the alchemists of the Arabo-Islamic world and that this fame, together with the pseudepigraphic works that carried it, extended to the Latin world, where pseudo-Avicennian alchemical treatises were translated, copied, summarized, and commented upon, and new treatises were composed under his name.

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¹ “Practitioners of alchemy should know that the kinds of metals cannot be changed [into one another]”.

Adapted and expanded from Moureau's doctoral thesis defended in 2010 at the Université Catholique de Louvain, this monograph extends over two substantial volumes for a total of more than 1,400 pages thoroughly annotated in more than 3,500 footnotes. Numbers apart, Moureau's praiseworthy effort aims to contribute to the study of the alchemical works of pseudo-Avicenna by presenting the first critical edition of an extensive, very complex, and deeply influential treatise, the *De anima*, and its first annotated French translation. Moureau's book rigorously achieves this and offers much more. The first volume is devoted to an extensive study that, in three chapters and one annex, positions the *De anima* in the context of the alchemical treatises that circulated under Avicenna's name, and of the penetration of Arabic alchemy into medieval Andalusia. It expounds the complex details of the composition and structure of *De anima*, presents a remarkably clear (given the complexity of the text) explanation of the alchemical doctrines underlying the treatise, identifies their sources, and provides a thorough description of the manuscript witnesses of this work and the criteria used for their assessment and a critical edition. Each of these sections deserves praise, since they all contribute to a significant advancement of our knowledge of the *De anima*, and, more generally, of the modes of transmission of Arabic alchemy in the medieval Latin world.

The close reading of the text implied by its critical edition has allowed Moureau to recognize that the *De anima* was not originally a single treatise but rather a compilation of three autonomous treatises characterized by formal and theoretical differences:

- (1) the *Porta elementorum*, a dialogical exposition of the physical principles that pertain to alchemy;
- (2) a text spanning from the first *Dictio* to the seventh and strongly influenced by Jabirian alchemy that constitutes the main portion of the *De anima*; and
- (3) a text that presents significant lexical differences with the preceding text, often with erroneous or non-existent references, and is not transmitted in the extant versions of the *De anima* that are abridged.

Moureau raises a question about the composition of the work: Is the *De anima* a translation of an Arabic alchemical compilation (i.e., were the three parts already circulating together as a single work before their Latin translation) or is it a compilation of three autonomous Latin translations? He provides evidence that could support both hypotheses but concludes that, in the absence of a stringent argument, the question must be left open: it could also be the case that the *De anima* took its current shape at the

same time as its contents were translated into Latin by a single translator/compiler.

The same scrupulous analysis of the internal and external evidence supports the author's efforts at dating and situating the composition of the *De anima*. In particular, Moureau brings to the attention of the reader the existence of a manuscript colophon (Cues, Bibliothek im St. Nikolaus Hospital, 299) that provides dates of composition and translation for the *De anima*: while the first date is bound to be fictional and actually fits well with the dates of the pseudepigraphic author, the second—1226 or 1235—could well be the genuine date of the translation of the work, But, as Moureau cautions, this date should be taken *cum grano salis*.

The second chapter delves into the sources of the *De anima* and is arranged in two sections, since the sources used in the treatise and the authorities that the text mentions explicitly do not overlap in many cases. Particularly praiseworthy is the exposition of the alchemical doctrines of the second part of the *De anima*: the formation of metals from sulphur and mercury; the existence of internal and external qualities of metals; the classification of matter into bodies, spirits, salts, stones, and other materials; and the many steps that the alchemist needs to follow in order to prepare the ingredients (bodies, spirits, elixir, and *fermentum*) for their alchemical marriage leading to the production of gold or silver.

The reader here is not only guided to the systematic appreciation of doctrinal points that are scattered and often intentionally left obscure by pseudo-Avicenna, but also offered an entry into theories that are shared by a large number of Arabic and Latin medieval alchemical treatises. It should not be forgotten that the *De anima* was one of the main channels of transmission of the alchemical ideas connected to the name of Jābir ibn Ḥayyān, ideas that proved very influential also in the Latin world.

The second part of this chapter surveys all the authorities mentioned by pseudo-Avicenna. The medieval Latin rendering of Arabic names and the influences of the Andalusian context in which this translation was produced result in a great deal of confusion and obscurity. In some cases, Moureau suggests only a possible identification or none at all. While Geber Abenhaen, Maurienus, and Aramuz are clearly identifiable with Jābir, Morienus, and Hermes, who were Zubaibar, Almortid, and Haelge?

The third chapter is devoted to an analysis of the manuscript tradition of the *De anima* that includes a critical assessment of the relationships between the seven complete Latin witnesses of the work, its 16th-century *editio princeps*,

and the incomplete and indirect tradition. Moureau applies a (neo-)Lachmanian approach to the tradition of the *De anima* and, through painstaking collation of all the available manuscripts and the statistical study of their variants, manages to reconstruct a reliable *stemma codicum* that identifies three main families of manuscripts and allows for a certain degree of contamination in the tradition. Moureau underlines that the text of his edition represents the reconstruction of a translation in medieval Latin of an Arabic text: the Latin translation is often obscure, sometimes incomprehensible, and surely its language is a Latin of *mauvais qualité*, strongly influenced by the lexicon and syntax of the Arabic original(s). The situation is further complicated by the fact that the Arabic original(s) of this work is/are now lost, and that Latin renditions of Arabic words and entire phrases can sometimes be decoded only as a tentative exercise in retro-translation. Even a quick glance at the *apparatus criticus* of the edition easily conveys the inherent difficulties of this kind of textual tradition and is surely telling of the editor's painstaking, meticulous, and truly impressive critical effort, an effort that reflects his mastery of medieval Latin and Arabic.

A French translation faces the pages of the critical edition: its literality and unadorned style are intentional choices by Moureau, who aims at preserving the features of the original Latin, its numerous traces of Arabic syntax, and the "word-by-word" technique typical of these early Arabic-Latin translations. Where the Latin text and the French translation may be cryptic, the extensive explanatory footnotes provide guidance to the reader and are an incredibly rich source of information on the lexical, doctrinal, and chemical problems raised by, and connected to, the text.

The monograph has a further important point of strength: almost 100 pages of the first volume are devoted to a glossary that lists and explains rare words and *hapax legomena*, as well as common words that have a particular or technical meaning in the alchemical context of the *De anima*. It is, in particular, in the explanation of alchemical terms that another aspect of Moureau's expertise comes to the surface: apparently, he has tried to replicate in the laboratory some of the procedures described in the treatise in order to understand the nature of the ingredients utilized better and to provide a more insightful interpretation of the text. This attention to the materiality of the alchemical work and the historical usefulness of replications places Moureau's historical and philological effort in line with the most recent developments in the scholarly approach to alchemy and cognate subjects. Moureau's glossary—together with the aforementioned catalog of Arabo-Latin authorities in the second section of the work—will surely be

used by scholars focusing on similar traditions as a precious tool for identifying the names of materials and substances obscured intentionally by the alchemists and unintentionally by the fluctuations that characterize medieval Latin translations from the Arabic language.

As I hope these few remarks may convey, Moureau's work is excellent. In concluding, I stress that this book offers a much needed and painstakingly accurate critical edition of one of the most influential, complex, and extensive medieval Arabo-Latin alchemical works, together with its first translation into a modern language. Moreover, as such, it stands as a model of the scrupulous and effective application of a sound method of textual and historical criticism to a very complex textual and doctrinal tradition. One should hope that more monographs of this level will appear in the near future: historians of alchemy, chemistry, and science in general will finally have at their disposal the reliable *corpus* of primary sources that has repeatedly been identified as one of the main *desiderata* in the field.