

Michigan Technological University

From the Selected Works of Steven Walton

2010

Jonathan Sawday, Engines of the imagination: Renaissance culture and the rise of the machine.

Steven A. Walton, *Penn State University*



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/steven-walton/13/>

for texts on hygiene in the inventories of medieval libraries; the intention was to assess the diffusion of this kind of literature, which is always halfway between expert knowledge and the vulgarization of a culture dedicated to safeguarding health.

The work is completed by a second volume that offers biographical data on the main authors who contributed to the *regimina sanitatis* genre; exact references to the Latin incunabula; an inventory of the presence of works on dietetics in the documents and catalogues of medieval libraries, both private and monastic; and four lists. These present a list of manuscripts that contain dietetic works in Latin; a list of manuscripts with dietetic texts in vernacular languages (French and Italian); a list of manuscripts with translations into Italian of the *Regimen* of Aldobrandino of Sienna; and a list of manuscripts that contain the books of *Diets* of Ishaq al-Isra'ili, with commentaries from the medieval university sphere.

In summary, this is an indispensable work for anyone who wants a closer look at the world of the medieval dietetic book, from both the preventative and the therapeutic perspective.

PEDRO GIL-SOTRES

Jonathan Sawday. *Engines of the Imagination: Renaissance Culture and the Rise of the Machine.* xxii + 402 pp., figs., index. London/New York: Routledge, 2007. \$33.95 (paper).

It is awkward to write a review of a book with whose major argument—that it was in the Renaissance that the European mind-set took a “turn to the machine”—you completely agree, and yet with whose minor points and supporting evidence you frequently find fault. Setting out to show that it was the English-speaking Renaissance that gave us our modern attitudes toward technology, machines, and their place in the world, *Engines of the Imagination* examines six facets of culture through six literary figures of the day. It is probably most important to understand that Jonathan Sawday is a literary scholar, not a historian of science and technology, and it is clear that this book speaks more to the former audience: he thinks nothing of mentioning off-hand George Herbert's poem “Easter Wings,” assuming that we can all call it immediately to mind without citation, but spends multiple pages explaining Elizabeth Eisenstein and Walter Ong on the print revolution—and still misses entirely the more recent debate (e.g., Adrian Johns) on that issue.

The volume investigates the contemporaneous nature of *Techné*, machines and hydraulics as markers of social power, labor in early print culture, gender and the machine in the Renaissance, illusion and magical mechanics, the “instrumental imagination” and the rise of rationalism, and—in a focused chapter—the machine in Milton. The chapters vary between broader observations on society and focused studies of individual writers, but all cast their nets widely to make their points. Beyond literary sources he clearly knows very well, Sawday excurses through art history—but here he relies on broad integrative sources that often suffer from overgeneralization. This will frustrate specialists, and his reach leaves him little time to investigate alternative interpretations.

Sawday's writing is engaging, with lively, cross-fertilized examples: he jumps in one page from *Kunstkammern* to *The Faerie Queene* and Dante and back to Aristotle and Plato. His methodology reminds us that at the time our “technology” did not exist but that the contemporary notion was broader than just levers and gears: “constructing the artificial device of a machine or engine . . . bore striking affinity to the mysterious process by which the equally artificial device of a poem came into being . . . for poems and machines were both products of *Techné*” (p. 174). More traditional historians may bristle at this connection/conflation, but it has much to recommend it. Readers will find “strange and wonderful” juxtapositions that at times strain credulity but at other times show fabulous synchronicity between mechanics, poets, artists, and writers and remind us that in the past the divisions between the *artes* may not have been as stark as those today. Still, Sawday is willing directly to compare John Donne and Frances Yates on technology, bring in Marxist socialism and Smithian capitalism as bearing directly on medieval economics, and marshal Norbert Wiener's Cold War cybernetics to explain the Renaissance distinctions of art and nature.

Reading the book is an exercise in excitement followed by frustration, in that Sawday has found numerous connections between disparate genres but can mistake the technology being discussed. On one hand, his explication of the material world of Montaigne's journals shows both how ubiquitous machinery (hydraulics) had become and also how an educated traveler would have apprehended these relative novelties. On the other, Sawday's confusion of a “dial” with a “clock” in *As You Like It* leads him to the wrong conclusion

about the latter's ubiquity at the time (pp. 76–77). He makes an analogous mistake in conflating weaving and spinning and in misinterpreting the gender implications of a Velázquez painting of Arachne (p. 132). He is also prone to claiming distinctiveness for the Renaissance but undermining his claim by showing the ubiquity of the same material (e.g., automata or imagery of the wheel of fortune) in the Middle Ages or engaging in rich discussions of topics (e.g., fifteenth-century Siennese machine drawing) for which he has no literary parallels.

I do not want simply to castigate Sawday for not being a good historian of technology. In fact, I wish more literary scholars paid more attention to the material culture of their period; but they need to do so in an accurate and in-depth manner. *Engines of the Imagination* is at times more a work of literary tourism than an investigation of early modern technology. It shows how remarkably far the machine penetrated the minds of writers, but also how directly unreflective the Renaissance mind seems to have been about those same machines.

Early in the book, Sawday cites A. O. Lewis's compilation of primary sources about technology, *Of Men and Machines* (Dutton, 1963), as his starting point, and he has drilled down and contextualized some of them. His concluding chapter uses Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* (Oxford, 1964) as a cornerstone to discuss nineteenth-century angst over industrialization as an analogue to early modern technological development and then blithely moves on to post-revolutionary Russian deindustrialization and Khmer Rouge deurbanization catastrophes—all in an attempt to show that this is akin to the English Renaissance rise in Virgilian *Eclogue* poetry. Here he is at his best in showing the breadth of his reading; but, necessarily, there is little depth in the discussion of either the technologies themselves or the debates over their interpretations, many of which have been simmering for decades (e.g., the role of economics in innovation in the late Middle Ages or the intersection of Protestantism/Puritanism with the promotion of technology).

I wholeheartedly agree with Sawday that the Renaissance gave us many of our modern notions of material culture and an "infectious mechanical optimism" (p. 95), and I appreciate his important insights, such as being attentive to the synchronicity of labor and of contemporary visual images dissecting the landscape. Historians of science and technology will see this volume as more of a synthetic summary than a groundbreaking analysis of early modern technology in

society—although they will find here an impressive array of contemporaneous literary observations about the machine. I sincerely hope that literary scholars give Sawday credit for trying to put the works of Milton, Montaigne, Donne, and others into the material context in which they were written.

STEVEN A. WALTON

Jérôme Torrella (Hieronymus Torrella). *Opus praeclarum de imaginibus astrologicis*. Edited by **Nicolas Weill-Parot**. (Micrologus' Library, 23.) 304 pp., app., bibl., indexes. Florence: Sismel Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2008. €48 (paper).

Jérôme Torrella belonged to a family of Valencian physicians whose most famous member was his brother Gaspar, onetime physician of Pope Alexander VI. Together with his two brothers, Jérôme was one of the many Spanish intellectuals who moved to Italy before the Italian Wars in order to study medicine at university. Like his brother Gaspar, he studied medicine first in Siena and then in Pisa. It was probably there that he came in contact with the famous Pier Leoni da Spoleto, physician to Lorenzo the Magnificent, who taught at the Pisan Studium from 1475 to 1487. No doubt the fertile hermetic environment of nearby Florence, and Pier Leoni's own teaching at Pisa, contributed greatly to his interest in astrological images. After obtaining his doctorate in medicine, Jérôme entered the service of the Queen of Naples, Joanne, wife of Ferdinand of Aragon (also called Ferrante). By 1496, when he started to write his *Opus praeclarum*, however, he had already left Italy, probably owing to the events that followed the French invasion of the Kingdom of Naples in 1494, and was residing in Valencia. This explains, at least in part, why the *Opus praeclarum*—which is structured as a dialogue between the physician and the king on the value of astrological images—is dedicated to Ferdinand the Catholic, King of Spain.

Nicolas Weill-Parot's edition of Torrella's work is the culmination of a series of studies on Torrella and other hermetic authors by the French historian. In his monumental book *Les "images astrologiques" au Moyen Âge et à la Renaissance* (Paris, 2002), he provided an erudite, comprehensive account of this rather neglected tradition of hermetic philosophy, devoting much space to minor authors and less-studied texts. This book, in contrast, concentrates on one work and one author; yet the two enterprises clearly complement each other.