

THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, or *Liber super ethicorum aristotelis*
(Commentary on the Ethics of Aristotle)

In Latin, illuminated manuscript on parchment

Northeastern Italy (Venice), c. 1470

ii (parchment) + 160 + ii (parchment) folios on parchment (extremely fine, prepared in the manner of Southern Europe), modern foliation in ink top outer corner recto, complete (collation, i-xii¹⁰, xii⁸, xiii-xvi¹⁰, xvii²), horizontal catchwords lower margin, between the two columns, quires one-six, below the second column in quires seven and eight, and below the second column, at the inner margin, with flourishes, in the remaining columns, no quire or leaf signatures, ruled usually very lightly with the top horizontal line full across, and single full-length vertical bounding lines, horizontal rules in ink(?), and vertical bounding lines in lead, single pricking along the outer bounding line slightly below the last line of text (justification, 213-205 x 150-148 mm.), written in rounded southern gothic bookhands by three scribes in two columns of forty to thirty-eight lines, the first scribe copied ff. 1-67rb, and ff. 81va, line 27- 82ra, line 19, the second scribe, ff. 67va- 81va, line 26, and the third scribe, ff. 82ra, line 19 to the end, majuscules stroked with red only following paragraph marks, incompletely rubricated, red rubrics completed only on f. 1, and lemmata underlined in red only through f. 4v (blank spaces for rubrics at the beginning of the books), paragraph marks, alternating red and blue, red and blue running titles, three-line alternately red and blue initials with very fine violet or red pen decoration respectively, diagram, f. 75v, NINE five- to ten-line ILLUMINATED INITIALS with floral borders, f. 1, HISTORIATED INITIAL WITH THREE-QUARTER BORDER of Thomas Aquinas (described in detail, below), f. 2 is creased, affecting the text in one column (crease also visible on f. 1, text remains legible), f. 1, slightly soiled and with some pigment flaking in the border and initial, small ink smudges, ff. 75, 113, slight stain f. 81, ink on occasional pages abraded (no loss of text), overall in excellent, almost pristine, condition. Bound in nineteenth-century red crushed morocco in the Jansenist style by R. Petit (note in pencil, front flyleaf, no binder's stamp appears to be present although a previous cataloguer reported a stamp on the front turn-in), spine with six raised bands flanked by rules in blind, gilt title, "Sancti Tomae ab Aquino liber super libros ethicorum Aristotelis MSS," and intricate monogram (of "E M B"--see below), elaborately gold-tooled turn-ins and green watered silk doublures, edges gaufered and gilt, front joint a little worn, minor rubbing and scuffs on the front and back covers, but in very good condition. Dimensions, 340 x 235 mm.

This is a deluxe, carefully written, large-format manuscript illuminated by Leonardo Bellini, the most important Venetian illuminator c. 1460-80, or a close associate. It survives in pristine condition, with broad margins, clean pages, clear and bright illuminated initials and elegant penwork decoration at almost every opening. Although the text survives in 125 manuscripts (some fragments), the Schoenberg Database lists no sales since the early nineteenth century, and there may be no copies in North American libraries.

PROVENANCE

1. The distinctive style of the illumination, script and penwork all support an origin in Northeastern Italy, in Venice, c. 1470. The manuscript is a good example of the style of decoration found in manuscripts illuminated by Leonardo Bellini (fl. c. 1443-1480), probably the most important Venetian illuminator c. 1460-1480 (we thank Dr. Frederica Toniolo for her comments on this manuscript). It seems likely it may be by Leonardo himself, or if not, by a close follower. Leonardo came for a family of important artists, including his uncle, Jacopo Bellini, and his even more well-known cousins Giovanni and Gentile. He introduced into

Venetian illumination decorative elements borrowed from Ferrara, noticeable in this manuscript in the distinctive borders made up of very regular penwork scrolls punctuated by large flowers and other motifs, as well as the roundels with animals, in this case a lovely depiction of a swan (see Venezia Museo Correr, MS CL III 332 in Mariani Canova, 1969, cat. 16, fig. 18, and note the similar flowers with very long stamens and the swan in a lozenge in the border, as well as the similarities in the bar border with three knotworks). He illuminated *commisioni* for Venetian noblemen, religious and humanist texts (for example, Alexander, 1994, cat. nos. 27 and 89).

The manuscript is strikingly pristine, and includes no notes or other marginalia; there is a single marginal correction in a hand very similar to scribe supplying an omitted line of text on f. 144.

2. The editors of the Leonine edition of this work (*Opera Omnia*, vol. 47, 1969, p. 35*, note 96) have suggested the possibility that this manuscript may once have belonged to the Dominican Convent of SS. Giovanni e Paolo in Venice, a thirteenth-century foundation that was suppressed in the first decade of the nineteenth century. It was an important foundation with a library of more than 700 Latin and Italian manuscripts when it was suppressed (its history discussed in Quinto, 2006, pp. 43-52). Their copy of this text was described in 1779: "MS 241, Cod Membr. In Fol. Saec XIV. Foll. 160. Thomae de Aquino Expositio in decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis. Bene scriptus" (Berardelli, 1779, p. 132). Since the manuscript described here is the only manuscript of the text with 160 folios, and it was clearly from Northern Italy and "bene scriptus" (written well), it may in fact be the copy from SS. Giovanni e Paolo.

3. Possibly once belonged to G. F. Laruelle, *Livres de la bibliothèque de feu G. F. Laruelle*, Liège, J. N. Delvaux, 1805 (listed in the Schoenberg Database no. 73168, but not verified in his sale).

4. Probably belonged to E. M. Bancel, the nineteenth-century French book and art collector, since the monogram on the spine appears to be his (De Ricci, 1935, p. 1032), but not identified in his sale, Paris, Labitte, 1882.

5. Back flyleaf, f. ii, in pencil (circled), "no. 134."

6. Belonged to the Haverhill Public Library, Massachusetts (De Ricci, 1935, p. 1062, no. 1); note in pencil, front flyleaf with notes on origin (Ferrara, c. 1480), provenance (E. M. Bancel), and binding (R. Petit, c. 1875).

TEXT

ff. 1-160, *Incipit scriptum beati Thome de Aquino ordinis fratrum predicatorum super libro ethicorum aristotelis*, incipit, "Sicut dicit philosophus in principio metaphysice sapientis est ordinare. Cuius ratio quia sapientia est ... Ergo preter virtutes morales sunt aliquae intellectuales sicut sapientia et intellectus et aliquae huius. Et sic terminatur primus liber"; ... f. 145, [book ten], incipit, "Post hoc autem de delectatione etc. Postquam philosophus determinavit ... et continuacio sentencie totius libri ethycorum," *Deo gratias, Deo laus honor et gloria, Amen.* [f. 160v, blank.]

Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Ethicorum*, or *Liber super ethicorum aristotelis* (Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle); edited in the Leonine Edition, *Opera Omnia* vol. 47 (1969), listing 125 manuscripts (including fragments), pp. 3*-30*; this manuscript briefly described, p. 4*, as Haverhill, The Public Library I, A 096/T46 (see also p. 274*); Dondaine and Shooner, 1967-, no. 1092; English translation by Litzinger, 1964 and 1993 (see also Online Resources). Divided into ten books, beginning on ff. 21, 51, 67, 85v, 99v, 116v, 131v, and 145. The text includes the usual diagram on f. 75v (see the edition, p. 291) illustrating the principle of

proportionality in compensation with a builder ("Aedificator"), a shoemaker ("Coriarius"), a house ("Domus") and a sandal ("Calciamentum").

ILLUMINATION

The text begins with an elegant illuminated frontispiece on f. 1, consisting of an eight-line historiated initial, pink and blue with ink tracery, on a polished gold ground, heavily edged in black, depicting St. Thomas seated at his desk with an open book, in white robes with a black cloak against a blue background, accompanied by a three-quarter border: in the inner margin, a blue and gold bar border with green and pink ornaments, top and bottom margins, floral borders of blue and pink flowers, all with large gold stamen, set in black ink trellises, with a roundel of "YHS" on a blue ground at the top, and a roundel of a white swan on rather greenish water, a cityscape in the background, at the bottom, large gold besants, heavily edged in black and decorated with ink sprays, throughout.

Each of the remaining nine books of the text begin with illuminated five- to ten-line illuminated initials; the initials are painted in two shades of pink (a few with additional green or blue), with a lush green acanthus leaf extending from the initial, with black-ink tracery, on a highly polished gold ground, edged in black, infilled with a large pink, or pink and blue, flower on a blue ground with white highlights, with a floral border extending from the initial of pink and blue flowers with large gold stamens, set into a sparse ink trellis with small gold balls decorated with ink tendrils. The initials for books two, four, and five (ff. 21, 51, and 67), are very similar; slight variations are observable in the initials for book three, f. 32, and six, f. 85v; the borders on ff. 131v and 145, include in addition blue, gold, and pink round flowers with small petals.

As discussed above (see Provenance), the illumination may be attributed to Leonardo Bellini (fl. c. 1443-1480), or a close follower (we thank Dr. Frederica Toniolo for her comments on the artist), the most important illuminator in mid-fifteenth century Venice, c. 1460-80. He introduced into Venice decorative elements from illuminators in Ferrara, seen here in the floral border and the animal roundel, with compositional and figurative elements used by his uncle, Jacopo Bellini. On Leonardo, see Alexander, 1994, cat. nos. 27 and 89; Armstrong, 2003; Bauer-Eberhardt, 1984; Mariani Canova, 1968 and 1969; and Pallandino, 2003.

The divisions within each book are indicated by two-line alternately red and blue initials with violet and red pen decoration respectively; the quality of the pen decoration is very fine, and remarkably uniform. Although they vary a bit in size and minor details, the same decorative pen motifs are found in all the initials in the volume. The one exception is the initial on f. 61v, which is similar, but uses different decorative motifs (a tiny variation is also used in the decoration of the initial on f. 139).

Thomas Aquinas (c.1224/1225-1274), the "Angelic Doctor," has been called the greatest philosopher between Aristotle and Descartes – certainly his place as the preeminent medieval theologian will not be debated. After early studies at the great Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, he studied at the University of Naples, where he met members of the new Dominican order, which he himself joined in 1244. He was in Paris from 1245 until the early part of 1248. The relationship between Thomas and Albertus Magnus was a close one, and it is likely during these first years in Paris he studied with Albertus at St. Jacques, as well as studying either arts or theology at the University. He then followed Albertus to Cologne, and certainly studied under him from 1248-1252 at the newly-established Dominican *Studium generale*. He returned to Paris, where he became Master of Theology in 1256. He then went to Naples, Orvieto, and finally Rome (1265-8), where he began his great work, the *Summa theologiae*, before returning to Paris,

serving again as regent master from 1268-1272. He spent the last years of his brief life in Naples, where he was sent to found a new Dominican *studium*.

Until the late twelfth century, only fragments of the Aristotelian corpus were known in the Latin West. The flood of new Aristotelian texts presented rich opportunities as well as serious challenges to medieval thinkers in the thirteenth century. For Thomas Aquinas – as well as for his teacher, Albertus Magnus – Aristotle was *the* philosopher. Thomas's ability to assimilate Aristotle's teachings, and to incorporate them into Christian theology, was one of his greatest achievements. His synthesis, seen by many as the highpoint of medieval theology, successfully reconciled inherent conflicts between the two systems – in the common phrase, reconciling faith and reason.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, written in Greek and based on lectures he gave in Athens in the fourth century B.C., may be his most influential work. In it, he sets out to define the end to which human behavior should be directed. He accepts "happiness" (doing well, making a success of life) as this end, and attempts to show how it can be achieved. For a person to be happy, he says, they must not simply pursue pleasure, but also excel in the activities that are distinctly human, namely the exercise of intellectual abilities. Happiness, in other words, is an "activity of the soul in accordance with virtue," defining "virtue" as both moral (courage, generosity, and justice) and intellectual (knowledge, wisdom, and insight). Aristotle also discusses the nature of practical reasoning, the different forms of friendship, and the relationship between individual virtue and the state. The complete text of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was translated into Latin for the first time by Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170-1253), who taught philosophy and theology at Oxford, before becoming bishop of Lincoln in 1235.

Although it is possible that Thomas knew the earliest translations of Aristotle's *Ethics* during his first years in Paris, he probably studied the text intensively for the first time with Albertus in Cologne, helping his teacher prepare his commentary on the *Ethics*. Thomas's own commentary was written later in his life, probably c. 1271-1272, in the midst of writing his great *Summa theologiae* (1265-1273). Thomas's commentary follows Aristotle's text closely, providing a detailed explanation, often line by line. He begins by discussing the aim of moral philosophy and the definition of what is "good" for man, followed by discussions of the moral virtues, including fortitude and temperance, justice, the intellectual virtues, such as prudence, wisdom, and understanding, friendship, and concludes with a discussion of the results of the pursuit of virtue, and the rewards (and limits) of pleasure and happiness. Thomas's aim in his commentary was to explain and present Aristotle's teachings; his own moral philosophy was presented more completely in the *Secunda secundae* of his great *Summa theologiae*, where the ultimate "good" is presented as union with God in the afterlife.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Guglielmo Giraldi

<http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artMakerDetails?maker=1067>

Latin Text of the *Sententia libri ethicorum*

<http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/ctc0104.html>

Corpus Thomisticum (works in Latin, with concordance, bibliography, etc.)
<http://www.corpusthomisticum.org/>

Text, in English (Litzinger, transl., 1964)
<http://dhsprory.org/thomas/Ethics.htm>
and <http://www.josephkenny.joyeurs.com/CDtexts/Ethics.htm>

Thomas Aquinas in English: A Bibliography
<http://www.home.duq.edu/~bonin/thomasbibliography.html>

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