

Essays in Medieval Studies 2

[Page numbers of the printed text appear at the right in bold.]

page 209**Thomas's Doctrine of Woman and Thirteenth-Century Thought****Richard J. McGowan**

While we may legitimately expect great thinkers to swim against the currents of their times, we can hardly expect them to swim up waterfalls. This metaphor fits the great thirteenth-century thinker Thomas Aquinas on the thirteenth-century's "obvious truth" that women are inferior to men. We can hardly expect his doctrine of woman to hold other than what it holds: Woman is the *imperfectus sexus*¹ and morally inferior to man.² In these claims, Thomas agrees with his contemporaries, and with the two most influential predecessors of the thirteenth-century intellectual milieu, Augustine and Aristotle.

But if Thomas's doctrine of woman holds that woman is metaphysically and morally inferior to man, his path to the idea of woman's inferiority differs significantly from the paths of Augustine and Aristotle as well as his contemporaries. Thomas's view of woman is neither a restatement of Aristotelian philosophy nor, as Boerresen maintains, "to be found in the reflections of Augustine, from whom he differs little on this subject."³ I will show, even if briefly, the difference between Thomas and Augustine on woman and note the pivotal importance of thirteenth-century biology for Thomas's treatment of woman. His dependence on close empirical observations as the foundation of his thoughts, while leading him to conclusions we find unacceptable, announces a new method-

page 210

ology for understanding human spirituality. Thomas's importance to the scientific tradition marks his method as more powerful than even he could imagine.

Thomas and the Augustinian Heritage

Thomas's philosophical anthropology differs so dramatically from Augustine's that Thomas cannot but help to have a different doctrine of woman. For Thomas, a human being is not a rational soul using an earthly and mortal body, but a *hoc aliquid* of body and soul, a body and soul unity. Thomas asserts that the soul is a *forma materiae*, a form of matter, not a *forma in materia*, a form in matter.⁴ The body and soul are intimately joined; the soul does not use the body as a tool. The soul is neither the mover in the moved,⁵ nor does it exist as a sailor in a ship.⁶ A human being is not two different kinds of things mixed together somehow. In maintaining that the rational soul is immediately and intimately united to the body, Thomas feels he has protected the unity of being human. But in protecting the unity of a human being Thomas has done something more: he has advanced a position quite different from anything Augustine's philosophical anthropology holds.

Augustine's celebrated definition of a human being holds that a human being is a *rationalis anima utens corpore*, a "rational soul using a body." ⁷ If a human being is a rational soul using a mortal and earthly body, then the soul and body do not seem to be a *hoc aliquid*, a "one object," and the soul and

page 211

body are not immediately united. Thus, Augustine places a greater distance between the soul and body than Thomas does. This greater distance, in turn, enables Augustine to maintain that man and woman are spiritually equal, but bodily unequal. His discussion, in *The Trinity*, of the human being as an *imago Dei*, an image of God, shows us as much.

Augustine's remarks in book twelve of *The Trinity* reveals his position that the body does not bear upon human spirituality and spirituality is sexless. Of Ephesians 4:23⁸ and Colossians 3:10⁹ Augustine says that

not according to the body, nor according to every part of the soul, but according to the rational mind, where the love of God is able to be, is a person made to the image of the one who created the person.¹⁰

The body has no bearing on a person's status as an image of God. Augustine is most adamant about the non-corporeal character of human spirituality: "Not only is it shown by truest reason, but also the authority of the Apostle declares, that not according to the body is a person made to the image of God, but according to the rational mind."¹¹

Augustine adds later that where a person is renewed to the image of God, "there a person is made to the image of God, where no sex is."¹² As images of God and spiritual creatures, being human admits of no sexual distinction. Conversely, we must realize that for Augustine, sexuality is wholly corporeal. The distance he thinks exists between the

page 212

body and soul enables him to make this separation. For Augustine, a person is a rational soul using an earthly body, the latter of which is male or female. Hence, if Augustine asserts woman's inferiority, which he does,¹³ that inferiority must be confined only to man and woman in their bodily aspects since that is the only place a sexual distinction occurs. The quality of the body does not bear upon the quality of the soul in Augustine's philosophical anthropology.

Thomas thinks differently. If the soul is a form of matter, not a form in matter, the body will bear upon the quality of the soul and the soul will reflect the body. That the body has an impact upon the quality of the soul is itself a product of the fundamental Thomistic principle that a form can be received only to the extent that the matter allows its reception: "in matter better disposed, the form more nobly participates."¹⁴ Thomas says of being human that "by as much as the body will have been better composed, it receives a more noble soul."¹⁵ In Thomas's philosophical anthropology, the body is a limiting factor in being human. While souls are of the same species and are the same form, they can exist and operate only to the extent that the body enables them to exist and operate.

Here we have a rather important point of departure by Thomas from Augustine. Augustine speaks as though the body has no bearing on the spiritual aspects of being human. Thomas's philosophical anthropology holds that the body bears greatly upon the quality of the soul. Thomas even goes so far

page 213

as to say that there is a *gradus inter virum et mulierem*,¹⁶ a grade between man and woman, where the *imago Dei* is concerned, and that not in all beings having an image is the image found equally."¹⁷ For Thomas, then, knowledge of the body becomes both important and necessary for an understanding of the soul and the human being. But the knowledge of the body which Thomas relies upon for his understanding of being human is the biology of the thirteenth-century. That biology, besides being heavily Aristotelian, posits very different reproductive roles for man and woman. That biology, in short, is quite mistaken.

Thomas's Understanding of Bodily Imperfection and the Birth of Women

Thomas thinks that woman is materially deficient with respect to man. When discussing the birth of children in the state of innocence, Thomas explicitly asks 'whether children would have been born with a perfect body regarding strength and stature and sex immediately after birth.'¹⁸ Thomas refers here to a person's sex as a perfection of the body and acids that in Paradise, not only was woman bodily imperfect, but that "woman, even with respect to her soul, was less perfect than man."¹⁹ We might wonder why women would even be born in the state of innocence, where no defect of natural operation would have been present²⁰ but Thomas anticipates precisely this question. He explicitly says women would have been born in the state of innocence, meaning that woman is perfect somehow.

page 214

Yet, that Thomas thinks women would have been born in the first state is of small consolation to woman's perfection, for Thomas also thinks woman is somehow *occasionata*, accidentally born and not fully intended by nature. He says that "although woman is beside the intention of a particular nature, which occurs in semen, intending offspring to follow in perfect likeness to the generator, she is not beside the intention of universal nature because without woman, generation is impossible."²¹ What Thomas means by this statement is that women are born when the father, the form-inducer,²² fails to produce what the father's reproductive power sets out to produce, namely, male offspring. Women, thinks Thomas, are born when something goes awry.

Thomas cites Aristotle's *The Generation of Animals* 4, 1 in showing this. He states that a woman is produced when "the semen of the man is unable to prevail over the matter of the woman as [the semen] sets the matter in its most developed arrangement and brings the matter into the perfect sex."²³ This inability on the part of man's semen means that the process of embryonic development, such as Thomas understands it, stops short of the process's ultimate goal, namely, the birth of a member of the perfect sex. Thomas refers to the inability of man's semen as an *impotentia*,²⁴ a weakness, with all the connotations "weakness" has.

Any understanding of the *impotentia* itself turns on the reproductive biology Thomas commits himself to. In Thomas's account of reproduction, man and woman have completely

page 215

different roles and make completely different kinds of contributions to the offspring. Thomas believes that in the act of generation, man provides an active power in the semen that will shape the matter that the mother provides. The man's semen and the woman's matter join together so that the active power of the man's semen can cause the offspring to gain its form. He says

The power to produce offspring is not passive in the semen of the man, as we say wood and stones are the house in potency, for in such a way that power is in the menstruum of the woman, but it is an active power, as we say the form of the house in the mind of the maker is the form of the house in potency.²⁵

The man, according to Thomas, contributes to the offspring actively and the woman passively. He says that "in all perfect living things in which there is the distinction of sex, the female is the patient and supplier of matter and the male is the agent and inducer of form, as is said in 15 *de Animalibus*."²⁶ In twentieth-century words, the thought is this: the father is the only parent who brings to the offspring anything of genetic importance. In thirteenth-century words, the idea is that only the father passes human nature to offspring.

Thus, Thomas can maintain, with Aristotle, that "a person is more like the father than the mother, since from the father the person receives the form and from the

page 216

mother, the matter."²⁷ And on these grounds, Thomas can say of children that "the father is to be loved more than the mother. The mother and father are loved as principles of natural origin. The father, however, is a more excellent reason for origin than the mother."²⁸ The father's role in reproduction, if Thomas is correct, is more important for the child's existence as the kind of being the child is. Her role in reproduction and the manner of her birth marks woman as bodily inferior to man, in Thomas's account. Upon the bodily inferiority, though, Thomas bases other conclusions about the sexes.

Some Consequences of Woman's Bodily Inferiority in Thomas's Thought

Since Thomas's philosophical anthropology holds that the quality of the body has an impact upon the quality of the soul, and that the soul is subsistent and intellectual, he is led into claiming that women, by nature, are subject to male authority. He says that "because nature is diverse in diverse beings, so according to nature there are diverse beings that rule and are ruled; for in one way a free person rules the slave and a male, the female, and a man, the boy."²⁹ By nature, men are fit to rule women, claims Thomas. This claim is not merely descriptive of the relative perfection of man and woman, but also prescriptive regarding good social order. Thomas says that "good order would have been lacking in the human multitude if some were not governed by others who are wiser. And thus, from such a subjection woman is

page 217

naturally subject to man."³⁰ But if women are subject to men, women should not speak publicly in church as teachers or priests, or so Thomas reasons. Thomas argues that teaching and persuading are not activities that subjects perform.³¹

Woman, owing to her material deficiencies, is less wise than man, and should not be priests, says Thomas. Further, Thomas says, on the grounds of woman's lesser wisdom, raising children requires a father more than a mother. When

he explains why marriages should last the lifetime of the husband and wife, Thomas says that the task of raising children requires a long time and that 'a woman alone does not suffice, but more is required in the work of the man, in whom there is more perfect reason for instructing and greater strength for punishing.'³²

And not only do men have more perfect reason, but men are more capable of acting on the basis of their reason, according to Thomas. Women are easily led about by their passions.³³ Thus Thomas agrees with Aristotle that men and women do not have the same ethical standards. Women, they think, are morally weak *propter imperfectionem corporalis naturae*, on account of the imperfection of their corporal nature.³⁴ Thomas claims not only a metaphysical or constitutional inferiority for woman, but also a moral inferiority attached to that alleged constitutional inferiority. Thomas thinks woman, owing to her allegedly imperfect body, is the *imperfectus sexus*: she is spiritually and morally man's inferior.

page 218

Thomas's Doctrine of Woman and Thirteenth-Century Thought

In that Thomas's doctrine of woman holds that woman is imperfect with respect to man, his thought in this area is quite ordinary for the thirteenth century. In its conclusions about woman, Thomas's thought hardly stands out from Aristotle's and Augustine's. In many ways, his doctrine of woman represents the typical, somewhat unenlightened, patriarchal point of view. Yet, Thomas's doctrine of woman represents a divergence from thirteenth-century traditions while at the same disclosing what the thirteenth century mind must have thought.

The idea that the soul is a material form reflecting the body is an Aristotelian thought. The idea that the soul is spiritual and subsistent is an Augustinian thought. What Thomas managed to do in his heavily Augustinian environment was to fashion a philosophical anthropology that holds that the soul is a material form, but subsistent and spiritual, too. In holding this, he enables his doctrine of woman to part company with Augustine's and Aristotle's doctrines. In holding that the soul is a material form yet subsistent, Thomas gives great impetus to understanding the body as a means to understanding what it means to be human. Biological knowledge is pivotal in understanding man and woman not merely in their corporeal aspects, but in their spiritual aspects as well. Sexuality, in short, can not be put exclusively in terms of the body and, paradoxically, biological knowledge becomes more important in understanding human beings. Thomas's emphasis on biological

page 219

knowledge is breathtaking, set, as it is, in a theologically oriented century.

Thomas solves the problem of gaining biological knowledge by assenting to a reproductive theory in which man and woman have wholly different roles. Thomas's doctrine of woman shows this as well as showing how heavily Aristotelian that biology is. While Thomas constantly refers us to something which Aristotle says, he does not rely on Aristotle's writing for a foundation of biological knowledge. Instead, he turns to Aristotle for corroboration of biological truths. Thomas seems to accept a body of knowledge independent of Aristotle's work, asserting that these facts are so and that that is why Aristotle makes the claims he makes.³⁵ May we conclude that Aristotle's biology was the accepted biology of the thirteenth-century thinkers, but that Thomas and others are unaware of the source of that biology? I am satisfied that that is indeed the case, though that thesis demands more thorough investigation.

And what are we to make of the ostensibly extraordinary woman, the one who is equal or superior to man? Does Thomas and do others overlook these women in formulating a doctrine of woman that states woman's imperfection? If Thomas does this, his doctrine of woman is, at best an *a priori* construct by an educated intelligent man. Furthermore, if Thomas does this, he would be contradicting his own system's demand to understand the body by empirical observation. In fact, Thomas does not overlook the evidence of "strong and brave women,"³⁶ women who

page 220

would disprove the rule that woman is the *imperfectus sexus*. Thomas handles this evidence by saying that what is small is counted as if nothing,³⁷ so these ostensibly rare women need not be taken into account when formulating generalizations about women. The question of whether Thomas, or any thirteenth-century thinker, has any idea of a universal scientific law must be asked here. On the face of it, Thomas's doctrine of woman seems to have no

conception of a universal scientific law. Here again I would counsel further examination.

Finally, I wish to conclude with what I consider to be the most important, and, by now, obvious point about Thomas's doctrine of woman as well as thirteenth-century thought. We must concede that medieval thought treats woman as imperfect and inferior. But we do not have to concede that Thomas's thought on woman or the thought of the Middle Ages is a product of hysteria, bias, or prejudice. Thomas's doctrine of woman is a doctrine formulated rationally upon the limited information available to him. Contemporary thinkers, especially feminists, among whom I number myself, have a tendency to treat too harshly any person who espouses a position at odds with accepted contemporary thought.

Doctrines like Thomas's are labeled misogynous and dismissed. However, if we take the time to investigate a doctrine of woman like Thomas's, we would find that such a doctrine, while wrong in many ways, can still be admired for the way it is put together. As contemporary thinkers, we should reserve judgment on the person and qualify the

page 221

harshness of our criticism. If contemporary thinkers, especially feminists, do this, the Middle Ages in all its richness will be more nearly within the grasp of our understanding.

Milwaukee School of Engineering

Notes

1. *Summa Theologica* (ST) III, q. 31, a. 4, *obj.* 1 and *ad* 1, *Parva Opera Omnia* vols. 1-25 (New York, New York: Misurgia, 1948), 4:137 "Sexus enim masculinus est nobilior quam sexus femineus." See also *In II Sent.*, d. 21, q. 2, a. 1, *ad* 2 and d. 18, q. 1, a. 1, *sed contra*. All translations are mine.
2. *In II Sent.*, d. 22, q. 1, a. 3, *obj.* 2; 6:580. "Infirmetas peccatum excusat. Sed mulier infirmior viro." See also ST II-II, q. 156, a. 1, *ad* 1.
3. Kari Elisabeth Boerresen, *Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Charles H. Talbot (Washington U. Press of Amer., 1981), p. xvii.
4. *In II Sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 4, *ad* 3; 6:399. "Essentia animae rationalis immediate unitur corpori sicut forma materiae."
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* I, 27, 52; Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 32, 1332. "Homo igitur, ut homini apparet, animo rationalis est mortali atque terreno utens corpore."
8. Eph. 4:23: "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds."
9. Col. 3:10: "You have put on the new nature which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."

10. *De Trin.* XII, 7, 12; PL 42, 1004-5. "... non secundum corpus, neque secundum quamlibet animi partem, sed secundum rationalem mentem, ubi potest esse agnitio Dei, hominem factum ad imaginem ejus qui creavit eum."
11. *Ibid.*; PL 42, 1004. "Sicut enim non solum veracissimo ratio, sed etiam ipsius Apostoli declaret auctoriatis, non secundum formam corporis homo factus est ad imaginem Dei, sed secundum rationalem mentem."
12. *Ibid.* "... ibi factus est homo ad imaginem Dei, ubi sexus nullus est."
13. Augustine refers to man as the *melior sexus* and woman as the *sexus infirmior* in *De conjugii adulterinis* II, 20, 21; PL 40, 486.
14. *In II Sent.*, d. 32, q. 2, a. 3, *ad* 1; 6: 683. "... secundum quod in materia melius disposita dignius forma participatur."
15. *Ibid.*, *sol.*; 6:683. "... ut quanto corpus melius complexionatum fuerit, nobiliorem animam sortiatur."
16. *Ibid.*, d. 16, q. 1, a. 3, *sed contra*; 6:525.
17. *Ibid.* "... et ita non in omnibus habentibus imaginem imago aequaliter invenitur."
18. *Ibid.*, d. 20, q. 2, a. 1; 6:564. "Utrum in statu innocentiae homines habuissent omnem perfectionem corpus quo ad virtutem et staturam et sexum, statim post nativitatem."

19. *Ibid.*, d. 21, q. 2, a. 1, *ad* 2; 6:572. "... et ideo mulier, etiam quantum ad animam, viro imperfectior erat."
20. *Ibid.*, d. 20, q. 2, a. 1, *obj.* 1; 6:564. "... in primo statu nullus defectus naturalis operationis fuisset."
21. *Ibid.*, *ad* 1; 6:565. "... quamvis mulier sit praeter intentionem naturae particularis, quae agit in hoc semine, intendens prolem adducere in perfectam similitudinem generantis, non tamen est praeter intentionem naturae universalis ... quia sine femine non posset esse generatio."
22. The form of a human being, its soul, comes directly from God, but the alleged generating parent, the father, predisposes the soul's reception. See *In II Sent.*, d. 31, q. 1, a. 2, *ad* 4; 6:673: "... anima autem ex mari, non ita quod anima rationalis traducatur, sed quia in semine est virtus formativa ... organizatur corpus et praeparatur ad receptionem animae rationalis" ("the soul is from the man, not that the rational soul is transmitted [by him] but because in the semen is the formative power which ... organizes and prepares the body for the reception of the rational soul"). Thus, for Thomas, only the father passes human nature to the offspring.
23. *Ibid.*, d. 20, q. 2, a. 1, *ad* 2; 6:565. "... generatio mulieris contingit, ut in 18 *de Animalibus* (sive 4 *de Gener Anim.*, cap. 1) dicitur, ex hoc quod semen viri non potest vincere super materiam mulieris, ut digerat ipsam ultima digestionem, et in perfectum sexum adducat."

24. See *In II Sent.*, d. 20, q. 2, a. 1, *ad* 2.
25. *Ibid.*, d. 18, q. 2, a. 3, *sol.*; 6:550. "Haec autem potentia non est passiva in semine maris sicut dicimus ligna et lapides esse in potentia domus (sic enim est potentia in menstruo mulieris), sed est potentia activa, sicut dicimus formam domus in mente artificis esse potentia domus."
26. *Ibid.*, d. 20, q. 1, a. 2, *sol.*; 6:563. "... in omnibus enim viventibus perfectis in quibus est sexus distinctio, femina se habet ut patiens et

materiam ministrans, et mas se habet ut agens et formam inducens, ut in *15 de Animalibus* dicitur."

27. Ibid., d. 30, q. 2, a. 2, *ad 5*; 5:667. "Philosophus ostendit in *5 Metaphysica* (text. 53)), dicens: 'magis homo est de genere patris sui quam matris, cum a patre formam recipiat et a matre materiam.'"

28. ST II-II, q. 26, a. 10, *resp.*; 3:109. "Sed, per se loquendo, pater magis est amandus quam mater. Amantur enim pater et mater ut principia quaedam naturalis originis. Pater autem habet excellentiorem rationem principii quam mater."

29. *Politicorum Aristotelis* I, *lectio* X; 21:398. "Et quia natura diversificatur in diversis; ideo secundum naturam sunt diversa quae principantur et subjiciuntur. Alio enim modo homo liber principatur suo servo, et masculus feminae et vir puero."

page 226

30. ST I, q. 92, a. 1, *ad 2*; 1:363. "Defuisset enim bonum ordinis in humana multitudine, si quidam per alios sapientiores gubernati non fuissent. Et sic ex tali subjectione naturaliter femina subjecta est viro." Of course, the subjection of woman to man is, in Thomas's view, for woman's own benefit.

31. ST II-II, q. 177, a. 2, *resp.*; 3:595. On why women should not speak in church, Thomas writes: "Primo quidem et principaliter propter conditionem feminei sexus, quo debet esse subditus viro."

32. *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, 122, 8; 5:260. "Ad hoc autem mulier sola non sufficit, sed magis in hoc requiritur opus maris in quo est et ratio perfectior ad instruendum et virtus potentior ad castigandum."

33. See *Pol. Arist. I, lectio X* and *Ethicorum ad Nicomachum Aristotelis VII, lectio 5*.

34. *Eth. ad Nic Arist. VII, lectio 5*; 21:237.

35. See, e.g., see nn. 26 and 27.

36. Ibid., XII, *lectio 5*; 21:237. "raro inveniuntur mulieres sapientes et fortes." See also ST II-II, q. 156, a. 1, *ad 1*.

37. ST II-II, q. 156, a. 1, *ad 1*; 3:525. "... id quod est parvum vel debile, reputantur quasi nullum."