THREE AND A HALF NOTES ON GRAMMAR
IN ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

Kevin G. Long

In the Prologue to his Summa Theologiae, St. Thomas proposes to treat his subject matter “in such a way as may tend to the instruction of beginners.” Unfortunately, these words might prove deceptively encouraging to the uninitiated reader. As is abundantly clear from even the first question, St. Thomas intends his work for beginners in theology, not for beginners in logic, natural philosophy, ethics, or metaphysics. In fact, Thomas insists elsewhere that there is a natural order of learning.

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1 This somewhat whimsical title was suggested by the fact that the fourth note, which was something of an afterthought, is only partly about grammar.

2 It is not necessary that the student of theology be an expert in all of these fields. It is sufficient that he have an educated knowledge of their principles and methods. See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Bk. 1, Chap. 3 (1094b28ff.); cf. S.T., I-II, Q. 171 art. 4, ad 3.

3 Expositio Super Librum de Causis, Lect. 1; and In IV Ethic. Lect 7, nn. 1209–11; in Maurer, Armand, trans. The Division and Method of the Sciences (Expositio super librum Boethii De Trinitate QQ. V and VI) (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1963), Appendix III, “The Order of Learning the Sciences”, nn. 1, 2, pp. 90–92. St. Thomas does not explicitly mention grammar in these two texts, but what is said of logic certainly extends to all the other liberal arts. It should be emphasized that where St. Thomas does speak of grammar, he usually means—not grammar in a colloquial sense of the rules of a particular language—
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beginning with the liberal arts\(^4\) of grammar\(^5\) and logic, which order the student ignores or violates at his peril.

The main purpose of this investigation is to illuminate four passages in the Prima Pars of the Summa which might prove troublesome for anyone who is not conversant with the liberal art of grammar.\(^6\)

"And therefore whatever are ordained to such works of speculative reason (\textit{opera rationis speculativi}) [e.g. the composition of fitting speech (\textit{constructio orationis congruae})] are indeed called arts by way of a certain similitude, but [more properly] liberal arts." S.T., I-II Q. 57, art. 3, ad 3; S.T., I-II Q. 94, art. 1, corp.

According to the Index Thomisticus, there are seventeen passages in the Summa Theologicae (and 137 in his other theological and philosophical works) in which he refers either to the example of the grammarian or to the liberal art of grammar. Furthermore, there are 18 additional passages in the Summa (and 188 in his works generally) in which he invokes the "modes of signifying." See Busa, Roberto, ed., \textit{Index Thomisticus: Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Operum Omnium Indices et Concordantiae} (Rome: Fromman-Holzboog, 1974) s.v. "grammatica", "grammatice", "grammaticus", "[modus] significandi".

verbs signify according to the mode of action and passive voice verbs signify according to the mode of passion.\(^{10}\) It is important to note, however, that there is not necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between reality (the mode of being) or logic (the mode of understanding) on the one hand, and grammar (the mode of signifying) on the other. Something which is by its nature active may be signified grammatically by the passive voice and vice-versa. One obvious example is sensation (seeing, hearing, etc.).

We say that we “see” (active voice) various colors and that these colors “are seen” (passive voice) by our senses. Yet the reality is that the colors are active principles (agents) which are imposing their sensible forms on our sense of sight.\(^{11}\) In other words, our senses are essentially passive and do not act at all upon the external colors.

In some languages, transitive verbs have a third voice in addition to active and passive, namely the middle voice. This is most notably the case in classical and biblical Greek.\(^{12}\) The middle voice can signify a condition of activity without necessarily referring to a prior or outside agent. For example:

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\(^{10}\) In the sense of “undergoing” or “being acted upon”.


\(^{12}\) See, for example, Jay, Eric, *New Testament Greek: An Introductory Grammar* (London: SPCK, 1958), pp. 14, 84, 173f. The middle voice often takes the same form as the passive voice, but it does have a separate form in the future and aorist. See also: Hansen, Hardy and Quinn, Gerald, *Greek: An Intensive Course* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001) p. 163: “A verb in the middle voice shows that the subject of the verb does the action, but that the action somehow returns to the subject, [and] that the subject has a special interest in the action of the verb. Verbs in the middle voice can be transitive and thus take direct objects; they can also be intransitive. . . . The force of the middle voice varies from verb to verb. The most common meaning the middle voice gives to a verb is ‘to do something for oneself.’”

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Active: οιδησεως θεματισε τον οιδησαν
*Ho sideros thermainetai twn sideron*
The blacksmith heats the iron.

Passive: οιδησας θεματισται υπο του οιδησας
*Ho sideros thermainetai hupo tou sideros*
The iron is heated by the blacksmith.

Middle: οιδησας θεματισται ταχως
*Ho sideros thermainetai tachos*
The iron heats quickly.\(^{13}\)

In the latter case, it is not clear whether another prior or external agent is heating the iron or whether the iron is supposedly heating itself. All that is established is that the iron is in some kind of state or condition of progressive and continuous degrees of hotness, independent of any reference to a prior or external agent.

It is less widely recognized that Latin also possesses a middle voice, although it appears to be seldom used.\(^{14}\) The same examples may be cited:

Active: *Faber calefaciet ferrum.*
The blacksmith heats the iron.

Passive: *Ferrum calefacetur a fabre.*
The iron is heated by the blacksmith.

Middle: *Ferrum calefacetur celeriter.*
The iron heats quickly.

\(^{13}\) In Greek, the middle voice is sometimes used with a direct or an indirect object. An adverb is used here to simplify and illustrate the grammatical comparison. It is noteworthy that—in Greek, as in Latin—the middle voice often takes the same form as the passive voice.

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Again, the iron is here signified as being in a state or condition of continuously progressive and continuous degrees of hotness, independent of any reference to a prior or external agent or cause.

The existence of the middle voice in English is typically ignored or denied in standard Greek, Latin and English grammar books, presumably on the grounds that it has no special form to distinguish it grammatically (i.e. by inflection) from the active voice.

"Everything That Moves . . ."

It is now possible to revisit the proposition from St. Thomas' prima via or "first way":

Omnem quod movetur ab alio movetur.

At first glance, this proposition appears to contain two verbs in the passive voice, or rather, two instances of the same passive-voice verb. In other words, it appears to mean:

Everything that is moved [passive voice] is moved [passive voice] by another.

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The passive voice, which signifies according to the mode of "passion" (i.e., "undergoing") already implies something—stated or unstated—which is signified according to the mode of action or agent. Therefore, grammatically, the proposition would be redundant and uninformative (if not meaningless). However, if the first verb is interpreted as being in the middle voice, the proposition must be read differently:

Everything that is moved [middle voice] is moved [passive voice] by another.

Or, more expansively:

For everything which is in the condition of continuously progressive transmutation toward act, there must be some prior or external agent which causes it to be in that condition.

This proposition may be taken as (a) self-evident (b) established dialectically (c) empirically verifiable (d) inherently dubious or (e) manifestly untrue. However, it has not been the intention of this investigation either to defend the truth or exposure the falsity of St. Thomas' assertion in the "first way". It has only been to explain that the grammar of the proposition, correctly understood, does not necessarily involve tautology or redundancy.


16 Unlike in Greek and Latin, the form of the middle voice in English typically follows that of the active rather than the passive voice. The failure to recognize the English middle voice is otherwise inexplicable since it is quite common even in everyday parlance: e.g. "The clock reads noon" (the clock does not actually "read" at all, but "is read"). "This biography reads (is read) like a detective novel." "The Latin word 'amare' translates (is translated) into 'to love.'", "My horse spoooks (is spoooked) easily". Other examples can easily be found in advertising: "This car drives (is driven) like a dream." "This pizza cooks (is cooked) in your microwave." "This sparkling water drinks (is drunk) like champagne."

17 I.e., accidental change in quality or quantity or place; cf. Aristotle, Categories, Chap. 14 (15a13–15b16).
The Second Note on Grammar: IN RECTO AND IN OBLIQUO

In Question 29 of his Treatise on the Trinity\(^{18}\) in the Prima Pars, St. Thomas addresses the topic of the Divine Persons. In the first article, he adopts Boethius' definition of "person" as "an individual substance of a rational nature." In the fourth article, he takes up the question "Whether this name 'person' signifies relation", that is, whether it signifies relationship or substance in God. The title alone should be a major clue that the issue in this article ultimately involves grammar and the modes of signifying.

In the four objections, it is argued that "person" signifies substance or essence rather than relation. In his response, St. Thomas begins by citing previous opinions that correctly conclude that "person" signifies both substance or essence and relation, but which fail to make the proper distinctions and therefore erroneously invite the implication that there are three divine substances or essences in the Trinity.\(^{19}\) Then he offers his own solution:

Therefore [each] divine person signifies a relation as subsisting [\textit{relatio ut subsistens}] . . . This name "person" signifies relation \textit{in recto} and essence \textit{in obliquo}.\(^{20}\)

Both the English Dominican translation\(^{21}\) and the Blackfriars translation\(^{22}\) render the last proposition as:

\(^{18}\) I.e., \textit{S.T.}, I, QQ. 27-49.

\(^{19}\) It is beyond the scope of this investigation to discuss the details of St. Thomas' complicated explication. It will suffice to point out the grammatical aspects involved.


\(^{21}\) \textit{Summa Theologiae of St. Thomas Aquinas}, (English Dominicans, trans.) (New York: Benziger Bros., [1912]).


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The name "person" signifies relation \textit{directly} and the essence \textit{indirectly}.

Unfortunately, the terms \textit{directly} and \textit{indirectly} do not convey the essentially grammatical meaning of St. Thomas' terms \textit{in recto} and \textit{in obliquo}.\(^{23}\)

From Geometry to Grammar

These two terms are ultimately derived from geometry in which \textit{in recto} refers to a line at a vertical right angle and \textit{in obliquo} refers to a line inclined toward the horizontal\(^{24}\) (see Figure 1).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{geometry_figure.png}
\caption{Figure 1}
\end{figure}

These two terms were later borrowed from geometry by grammarians to distinguish the various cases of the noun, pronoun, adjective, etc. "\textit{In recto}" refers to the nominative case and "\textit{in obliquo}" to the declined cases: genitive, dative,

\(^{23}\) This is not an isolated instance. St. Thomas uses one or the other of these terms eleven times in this article alone. They are consistently mistranslated.

\(^{24}\) St. Thomas invokes this geometrical meaning in distinguishing the three types of motion. \textit{S.T.}, II-II, Q. 180, art. 6.
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accusative and ablative. St. Thomas elsewhere explains the basis for this derivation:

The nominative is the one that is said to be a name principally, for the imposition of the name to signify something was made through it. Oblique expressions [obliqui] of the kind cited are called cases of the name because they fall away [cadunt] from the nominative as a kind of source of their declension. On the other hand, the nominative, because it does not fall away [cadit], is said to be erect [rectus].

Figure 2

25 Deferrari, Roy, Dictionary of St. Thomas Aquinas (Boston: St. Paul editions, 1960), s.v. “rectus” and “obliquus”. According to the Index Thomisticus, St. Thomas invokes this distinction at least twenty times in the Summa Theologiae and almost one hundred times throughout in his other works. References to the “modes of signifying” frequently appear as well.

26 The fourth principal part of cadere is casum, from which the term “case” is derived.


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The crux of St. Thomas’ argument appears to be twofold. First, that the definition of “person” consists of two grammatically distinct parts: (a) the part that signifies in recto (by means of the nominative case, i.e. “individual substance”) and (b) the part that signifies in obliquo (by means of the genitive case, i.e. “of a rational nature”). Second, that, at least as predicated of God, this is purely a grammatical distinction since “what subsists in the divine nature is nothing other than the divine nature.”

Both the English Dominican and the Blackfriars translations consistently fail to recognize the grammatical character of St. Thomas’ response to the central issue of this article.

In Question 41, article 6 of the Prima Pars, St. Thomas takes up a difficulty regarding the persons of the Trinity which defies translation into English. He asks whether or not the Second Person can be said to have the "potentia generandi." The temptation is to render this phrase as "the power of generating." The question, on this interpretation, is whether or not God the Son has the capacity to generate another Son. The answer would obviously be no.

However, the question as posed in Latin is not so obvious. As St. Thomas points out, the term "generandi" can be interpreted either as (a) the gerund of the active verb or (b) the gerund of the passive verb.

In other words, the phrase "potentia generandi" can mean either (a) "the power of generating" or (b) "the power or capacity of being generated." Thus the Second Person can be said to have the "potentia generandi" in the second sense, but not in the first, which can be attributed only to the First Person in His relation as Father.

A similar difficulty arises within speculative grammar itself with regard to its own proper object. The phrase "modus significandi"—since it includes the gerund—can be interpreted in two ways according to whether the gerund is taken as active or passive.

The late-medieval grammarian Thomas of Erfurt addresses this problem at the beginning of his treatise Grammatica Speculativa. He proposes that the "active mode of signifying" be understood as belonging to "that which signifies" (words and their consignifications) and the "passive mode of signifying" to the real objects which are signified by those words.

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29 St. Thomas refers to it as a "gerundivus" which is best translated in this context as "gerund" since in English "gerundive" ordinarily refers to the verbal adjective; On gerunds and gerundives see Allen and Greenough, n. 159, p. 75, nn. 488-510, pp. 709-20: The gerund can be considered a special case of the gerundive. It is used in the oblique cases as a verbal noun and is always active. The gerundive, by contrast, is always passive, and used either as an adjective per se, or as an adjective functioning as a noun. The gerundive has two uses (a) as a participle and (b) as in conjunction with the noun as an equivalent to a gerund. As Allen and Greenough point out, this makes it active when it is translated into English, but in Latin it retains its passive meaning. See also Wheelock, Chap. XXXIX, pp. 187-89, 190; and Nesfield, pp. 13, 61-63, 171, 314, 322, esp. Chap. XXXIII, passim.

30 St. Thomas adds that the noun potentia signifies in recto while the genitive gerund signifies in obliquo.


32 It is important to note that Erfurt is not suggesting that the modus itself is "active" or "passive" but that the gerund "significandi" has an active or passive sense.
The Fourth Note on Grammar:
THE MISBEGOTTEN MALE

In his *Treatise on the Work of the Six Days*, St. Thomas takes up the question of "The Production of the Woman." The first article is "Whether the Woman Should Have Been Made in the First Production of Things." The first objection is based on a text from Aristotle's *The Generation of Animals*:

τὸ γὰρ ὃσεσ ἀρετὴν ἔστι τετεθεμένον

*Femina est mas occasionatus.*

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33 S.T., I, QQ. 65-102.
34 S.T., I, Q. 92, art. 1-4.
35 The argument is similar in S.T., I, Q. 99, art. 2.
37 This is the Latin translation by William of Moerbeke on which St. Thomas may or may not have relied. It is also possible that St. Thomas was relying on a variant translation by Moerbeke who renders this Greek term elsewhere as "orbata" (possibly meaning "bereaved", or "deprived of children"); see In II De Anima, Bk. II, Chap. 4, Lect. VII, (415a25). In his commentary on this latter passage, St. Thomas reads "peperomenos" (or "orbata") as "imperfecta sicut pueri non generant", i.e. "imperfect as a child who cannot reproduce", n. 313; In II De Anima, Chap. 4, Lect. VII, n. 314 (415a25).


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For the female is, as it were, a mutilated male.

The objector's argument is that nothing of this description should have been made in the first production of things, that is, before the Fall. After proposing two further objections, St. Thomas proceeds, as usual, to offer a sed contra*39 followed by his own respondeo and his replies to the three objections.

He begins his reply to the first objection with a widely quoted but almost universally misunderstood and almost invariably mistranslated proposition:

*Per respectum ad naturam particularum, femina est aliquid deficient et occasionatum.*

With respect to the nature of particulars, the female is something "deficient" and "occasionated."

The correct interpretation of this passage depends on (a) understanding the precise meaning of "nature" in this context; (b) understanding the meaning of the technical terms "deficiens" and "occasionatum"; and (c) discerning whether the connotation of the statement is intended to be affirmative, negative or neutral.

The obstacles to understanding this proposition are not simply grammatical. They are also etymological, informational, and ideological, as will appear below. However, it is difficult to separate the grammatical from the other elements of the problem. It will be necessary to provide some context for St. Thomas’s proposition and the reasoning that justifies it.

40 It should be noted that St. Thomas' sed contras do not necessarily reflect his settled opinion. They occasionally represent the extreme and unnuanced opposite of the objections leaving him the opportunity to steer a middle and more nuanced course.
41 This nonce word is used until a proper—or at least plausible—translation of *occasionatum* is established.
The One-Seed Theory

In the corpus of the article, St. Thomas reveals his opinion about the generation of animals:

Among perfect animals, the active power of generation [in the semen] belongs to the male sex and the passive power [in the menstrual blood] to the female.

In this passage, St. Thomas appears simply to repeat what he has read in the works of the famous Greek physician Hippocrates (fourth century, B.C.). His conjecture about conception is known among historians of medicine as the “one-seed” theory. It identified, by way of strict analogy, the fertilization of female animals by semen with the fertilization of the seeds of plants in soil. In both cases, the female principle of generation contributes only the passive

Galen: The One-Seed Theory

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Unhappily, Galen’s works were “lost” in the Middle Ages and did not resurface until the fourteenth century. According to Aristotle, all natural and living beings produce their like:

For any living thing that has reached its normal development and which is unmitigated . . . the most natural

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For any living thing that has reached its normal development and which is unmitigated . . . the most natural
act is the production of another like itself, an animal producing an animal, a plant, a plant in order that, as far as its nature allows it to partake in the eternal and divine.  

If all natural things thus produce their like, why would unquestionably and incontrovertibly male semen not always produce male animals?  

St. Thomas begins his response to this conundrum in the only intelligent way possible given his Hippocratic and Aristotelian assumptions. He appears to concede the objector's premise:

Femina est aliquid deficient et occasionatum

However this concession is couched in a crucial distinction. Consider the opening words:

49 Of the same infima species.
50 Aristotle, De Anima, Bk. II, Chap. 4 (415a27–415b2).
51 This remains a conundrum whether or not one assumes a Fall.
52 St. Thomas here provides ammunition for his opponents which none of them seem to notice. He uses the neuter "aliquid" (something) implying that a female is a "thing" rather than a person. However, in his defense, it must be noted that using "aliquis" (someone) would falsely restrict the proposition to human beings in a discussion extending to all living things.
53 There is no compelling reason to think that St. Thomas regarded "occasionatum" as a synonym for—or even a close paraphrase of—the Greek "peperomenos".
54 Aristotle, Categories, Chap. 5, (2b13): “primary substances are most properly called substance in virtue of the fact that they are the entities which underlie everything else.”
55 Parts belong in the category of substance by reduction. Similarly, the point does not belong to the category of quantity, but is reduced to it as a “principle”, see S.T., I, Q. art 5, corp.
56 The limbs of an animal or tree are separable by violence, but not by nature; e.g. it is not within the natural inclination of the man or the oak that it lose a limb.
57 St. Thomas is speaking loosely when he refers to the “nature of the particulars”. It is the “first level of nature” only in an extended sense. On this reckoning, the substances themselves constitute the “second level” of nature.
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simulacrum of the substances to which they belong. (An apple does not produce another apple but rather an apple tree.)

At the third level, St. Thomas' distinction applies to the difference between individual natural substances and the totality of the natural order\(^{58}\) of which they form a part. Each substance has an individual nature by which it is destined to a certain kind of activity. From this perspective alone, there seem to be contradictions. It is in the nature of the lion to eat zebras, but it is, at the same time, in the nature of the zebra to live a long and healthy life.\(^{59}\) It is only from the perspective of the natural order as a whole that one can judge the situation of each species and resolve the contradiction in favor of one species over another. (Despite the individual aspiration of zebras, the general intention of nature as a whole appears to be that some of them be eaten by lions.)\(^{60}\)

At the fourth level, St. Thomas recognizes that the natural order itself is a part of the providential order of God who is the Author of Nature.\(^{61}\) This suggests that even things which appear to us by chance—and some really are by chance—are nevertheless fully intentional on the part of God.\(^{62}\) As St. Thomas concludes, God fully intended the woman to be produced in the first order of things. According to St. Thomas' line of reasoning, this was neither accidental, unintended nor a monstrous fluke of nature.

\(^{58}\) The third level of "nature" in this analysis.

\(^{59}\) The "ecosystem" as it is presently called.

\(^{60}\) The zebra's stripes act as natural camouflage in order to prevent it from being eaten.

\(^{61}\) The fourth level of "nature" in the broad sense.

\(^{62}\) Klapisch-Zuber, Christiane, ed., A History of Women in the West, Vol. II: Silences of the Middle Ages (Cambridge: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 57: "St. Thomas believed that semen was subject to the influence of the stars, through which God worked his will in the world." What St. Thomas believed about the stars is irrelevant. The point is that God directly intends the production of woman precisely as woman not as something monstrous, misconceived or misbegotten.

The Feminist Prism

It is now possible to return to the beginning of St. Thomas' reply to the first objection:

*Per respectum ad naturam particularum, femina est aliquid\(^{63}\) deficiens et occasionatum.*

Whether out of general unfamiliarity with St. Thomas or out of insistence on reading him through the prism of their own ideology, some feminist authors have perceived in this passage something sinister, misogynistic and antagonistic toward women.

Simone de Beauvoir observes in the *Introduction* to her influential book, *Le Deuxième Sexe*:

St. Thomas for his part pronounced woman to be an "imperfect man", 'an incidental' being.\(^{64}\)

Elsewhere in the same work she writes:

All the Fathers of the Church proclaimed [women's] abjectly evil nature. St. Thomas was true to the tradition when he declared that woman is only an "occasional" and incomplete being, a kind of imperfect man.\(^{65}\)

\(^{63}\) St. Thomas here provides ammunition for his opponents which none of them seem to notice. He uses the neuter "aliquid" (something) implying that a female is a "thing" rather than a person. However, in his defense, it must be noted that using "aliquis" (someone) would falsely restrict the proposition to human beings in a discussion extending to all higher animals.


\(^{65}\) De Beauvoir, op. cit., Chap. VII, p. 90. Even if St. Thomas, or anyone else, believed that women were "less perfect" than men, it hardly follows that they would be "abjectly evil".
Three and a Half Notes on Grammar

One author who is deeply indebted to Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Daly, explains in her book *The Church and the Second Sex*:

The Aristotelian idea of fixed ‘natures’, as well as its view of woman having only a minor role in procreation, that of merely supplying the matter whereas the male supplied the form, was taken over by St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Thus, following Aristotle, Aquinas held that the female is defective as regards her individual nature. He wrote that she is, in fact, a misbegotten male, for the active force in the male seed tends to the production of a perfect likeness in the masculine sex. Her existence is due to some defect in the active force. . . .

According to Barbara McDowell, editor of *The Woman’s Almanac*:

St. Thomas Aquinas . . . said that woman is ‘defective’ and accidental . . . a male gone awry.

Elizabeth Gould Davis writes in *The First Sex*:

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67 Daly et al. insist on reading *natura particularum* as referring to the nature of the individual female rather than to the “nature” of the individual seed.

68 Daly, op. cit. pp. 62, 91. Daly envisions herself as having “broken free from the stranglehold of patriarchal religion, with its deadly symbols, its ill logic, its gynocidal [sic] laws and other poisonous paraphernalia. . . . Patriarchy is itself the prevailing religion of the entire planet, and its essential message is necrophilia.” Daly, op. cit., p. xii.

69 McDowell, Barbara, ed., *Woman’s Almanac* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Assn., 1977) p. 557. This quotation appears as the entry for “A” in a purportedly humorous section entitled “The ABCs of Sexism.”


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The foremost poet of Puritanism, John Milton, echoed thirteenth-century Saint Thomas Aquinas, who had called woman a “monster of nature” in his lines from *Paradise Lost*:

*Ah, why did God,*  
*Creator wise that peopled highest Heaven*  
*With spirits masculine, create at last*  
*This novelty on earth, this fair defect*  
*Of nature, [Woman]?*

Susan Groag Bell in *Women: from the Greeks to the French Revolution* explains the passage in the following way:

[According to Aristotle,] “the female, in fact, is female on account of inability of a sort, viz. it lacks the power to concoct semen. . . . Now of course [in conceiving], the female, qua female is passive, and the male qua male is active. . . .”

The following excerpt is from St. Thomas’ *Summa Theologica*. The similarity of his thought to that of Aristotle . . . is noteworthy . . .

*As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten.*

Although not a feminist per se, Vern Bullough brings a quasi-feminist attitude to bear in his book, *The Subordinate Sex*:

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71 Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 10. Milton continues: “And not fill the world at once with men as angels without feminine, or find some other way to generate mankind?”, loc. cit.

The official [anti-female] attitudes of the church can be found in the great thirteenth-century doctor of the church, St. Thomas Aquinas. . . . Still, he [at least] recognized that women were human and had a right to exist, although he felt a need to justify her existence since, according to Aristotle, woman was only a ‘misbegotten male’, and ‘nothing misbegotten or defective should have been in the first production of things.’ Aquinas felt Aristotle was wrong. Woman, he argued, was not misbegotten but included in nature’s intentions in order to continue the works of generation.73

Even translators presumably favorable to St. Thomas—like the English Dominicans and Father Gilby of the Blackfriars—have interpreted his words in an unfavorable light:

As regards the individual nature, woman is defective and misbegotten.74

73 Bullough, Vern L., The Subordinate Sex: A History of Attitudes toward Women (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973) [emphasis added]. Bullough seems to be aware that St. Thomas “corrected” Aristotle in the sense of making distinctions that the latter does not make. But he fails to recognize that the rest of Q. 92, article 1, from which he quotes a few words, argues that human generation, unlike that of plants and animals, is ordered to more than to the perpetuation of the species. In fact, St. Thomas, following Aristotle, regards generation as a function of the vegetative power. See In II De Anima Ch. 4, Lect. VII, n. 213; Rather, he points to a higher kind of activity, namely the “the more noble work of life which is an intellectual pursuit” (nobilior opus vitae quod est intellegere) to which both men and woman are ordained (ordinatur).

It is worth noting that Bullough’s relatively sympathetic treatment of St. Thomas occurs in a chapter entitled “On the Pedestal: The Beginning of the Feminine Mystique.”

74 The English Dominicans; this translation of the entire Question (S.T. I, Q. 92, art. 1–4) is reprinted without commentary in Agonito, Rosemary, History of Ideas on Woman: A Sourcebook (New York: Capricorn Books/G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1977) p. 83ff.
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(occasum) and the derivative verb “occasionare” which are in turn derived from the verb “occido” (from ob + cado). The primary meanings of the latter are: (a) to fall or fall down; and (b) to set (in the sense that the sun, planets and stars “set” when they move below the horizon.) The first meaning can have a positive, negative or neutral sense, depending on the context. If heavy objects fall, they do so with varying results, some positive, some negative and some neutral. The second astronomical meaning is purely descriptive and has only a neutral connotation.

The principal parts of the root verb are occido, -cidere -cidi -cisum. It should be noted that there is no form of the word occidere which signifies or implies “generation” or “begetting.” The main words in Latin that do so are generare, gignare, and procreare and their presumed negative past participle forms. St. Thomas nowhere uses any of the latter three terms, at least not in reference to the production of the woman.

The verb occasionare means “to occasion or cause accidentally.” Since accidents can be affirmative, negative or neutral, it follows that occasionare can be likewise positive, negative or neutral. It likewise follows that, if occasionatus (the past passive participle) can bear a positive, or at least a neutral connotation, it need not be viewed as essentially pejorative and must be interpreted according to the context laid out above.

If it is stipulated that the semen of a male animal (qua male) by its very nature “intends” to produce another male and is frustrated by the accidental production of a female, then it follows that the result is a failed or frustrated or “accidental” (occasionatus) male. On this assumption, the term occasionatus must be interpreted as at least relatively negative.

However, if the order of nature as a whole intends to use a mode of conception which is arguably accidental (at the level of the individual part) for the sake of producing roughly equal numbers of males and females, then what appears to be “accidental” is actually intentional and purposeful from this perspective. In this context, occasionatum would certainly have an positive connotation.

Finally, it should be noted that The Oxford Latin Dictionary gives as the first meanings of the noun occasio: (1) “convenient or favorable circumstances” and (2) “the appropriate moment”; Lewis and Short’s Latin Dictionary includes among the primary meanings: (1) “fit time”, (2) “convenient season”, (3) “favorable moment”; Cassell’s Latin Dictionary gives the primary meaning as “a favorable moment”. Likewise, the Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy defines the English cognate “occasion” as “a principal or circumstance that favors or makes opportune the present action of a free cause. It is sometimes referred to as an accidental cause.” These four sources argue strongly in favor of a positive connotation for occasionatus.

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85 I.e., has as its natural end or purpose.
86 I.e., the “male” semen.
87 Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “occasion”.
88 Lewis and Short’s Latin Dictionary, s.v. “occasion”.
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From this perspective, the production of the woman can be construed as a kind of "unintended but welcomed event" or even "a felicitous or serendipitous happenstance."

It should be clear therefore that neither the context nor the grammar of St. Thomas' statement at the heart of Question 92, art. 4 bears the interpretations advanced by both his feminist critics and his presumably sympathetic allies. 91

From these four notes it can be concluded that the pursuit of St. Thomas' theology, at least in some instances, presupposes some familiarity with grammar—in particular, the liberal art of speculative grammar.

91 In the last analysis, there remain a number of points which are still unclear. First, it is not clear what Aristotle meant by "peperomenos". Second, it is not clear whether Moerbeke's "occasionatum" was an adequate translation or paraphrase. Third, it is not clear what St. Thomas understood by "peperomenos" or "occasionatum" in the objection or what he intended by repeating it in reply. Fourth, it is not clear whether St. Thomas intended this term to have a positive, negative or neutral connotation. The answers suggested here are largely speculative and provisional but will have to suffice for this investigation.