

Book Review

**Beullens, Pieter,  
*The Friar and the Philosopher: William of  
Moerbeke and the Rise of Aristotle's  
Science in Medieval Europe*<sup>1</sup>**

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Part of the appeal of the intellectual tradition of the high middle ages (a.k.a. scholasticism), at least to the interested, is its corporate approach to philosophic practice. The priority for learning as a collective engagement finds its organic embodiment in the so-called *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, roughly translated as “community of teachers and students,” or the *university* that we call today. This is not to say that philosophy as a communitarian undertaking was peculiar only to the medieval culture. One may observe that the same communitarian features which make philosophy what it is, then and now, hark back to the blueprint introduced by its ancient exponents who, even before the establishment of Plato’s *Academy* or Aristotle’s *Lyceum*, had known the necessity and advantage of coming together for the common pursuit of wisdom. Plato’s and Aristotle’s schools in fact were the evolved versions of this more ancient communal philosophic experiment represented by the community of Pythagoreans, named after Pythagoras himself, the very figure credited by tradition as the originator of the word “philosophy” and a pioneer of its advancement as an interactive undertaking. This Pythagorean paradigm was carried on by Hellenistic communities and duplicated, after the fall of Rome, by kingly courts, monasteries, and cathedral schools until it was adopted by the *studia* of the later medieval ages. It is with this collectivist lens that I wish to frame my reading of the legacy of William Moerbeke as recounted by Peter Beullens in his book, *The Friar and the Philosopher: William of Moerbeke and the Rise of Aristotle’s Science in Medieval Europe*. Most readers are familiar with Aquinas’ scholarly affinity with Aristotle but very few are cognizant of the crucial role in such kinship of the literary mediation of Aquinas’ backstage

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<sup>1</sup> London: Routledge, 2023, 160pp.

collaborator and fellow Dominican friar, William of Moerbeke. William was considered one of the most prolific translators of the 13<sup>th</sup> century owing both to the volume and quality of his outputs which counted among others the entirety of Aristotle's body of works and some of the known authoritative Aristotelian commentaries;<sup>2</sup> an apocryphal Aristotelian text, *Liber de Bona Fortuna* (Book of Good Fortune);<sup>3</sup> Archimedes' works on physics and mathematics (along with their commentaries);<sup>4</sup> Hero of Alexandria's book on optics, *On Mirrors*;<sup>5</sup> and Galen's *On the Properties of Foodstuffs*.<sup>6</sup> William was also reported to have thought of translating the works of Hippocrates though, as Beullens acknowledged, the plan did not seem to materialize. In the surface, it would appear as if translation work during the Middle Ages was a mere solitary project pursued by a scholar committed to his craft all by his lonesome. Such was the case of the early Italian translators like Gerard of Cremona,<sup>7</sup> James of Venice,<sup>8</sup> Burgundio of Pisa,<sup>9</sup> as well as the English linguists like Michael Scot and Robert Grosseteste.<sup>10</sup> But as Beullens attested, all medieval translation initiatives actually emanated from a larger network of needs and institutional arrangements which were themselves facilitated by the participation and cooperation of various agents such as emperors, bishops, abbots, librarians, copyists, students, professors, and including book merchants. William occupied an important place at the center of this medieval network due to his exceptional productivity. Part of William's widely acknowledged reputation was his ability to do Latin translation from the original Greek. Other translators worked on their manuscripts either from Arabic (e.g., Michael Scot)<sup>11</sup> or Castilian (e.g., Dominicus Gundissalinus),<sup>12</sup> but William was one of those rare medieval scribes who could read and write their way to Latin from Aristotle's native language. William's talent to render more than one version of a translated work or to update and revise existing ones was another genuine proof of his outstanding industry. The whole stretch from 1260 to 1270 saw William at the height of prodigious literary activity. And yet despite his sterling portfolio, admittedly, very little biographical facts are known about William, who is invariably cited in

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<sup>2</sup> Pieter Beullens, *The Friar and the Philosopher: William of Moerbeke and the Rise of Aristotle's Science in Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 2023), 58.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 89–90.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–29.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 30–33.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

medieval documents as “William the Fleming”<sup>13</sup> or “William of Brabant.”<sup>14</sup> His name was mentioned by Roger Bacon (mainly to discredit his works)<sup>15</sup> and by a fellow Dominican Henry of Herford (who recorded William’s demise and noted positively his accomplishments);<sup>16</sup> he was also honored by the Polish scientist Vitello with a dedication in the preface to his book *Perspectiva* (based on William’s translation of Hero of Alexandria’s *On Mirrors*);<sup>17</sup> an important recognition was also accorded him (along with another conciliar *peritus*, the Franciscan John of Constantinople) in the chronicle of the Council of Lyons.<sup>18</sup> But apart from these references, William’s name remained hidden beneath the transcripts of his translated texts. Despite the seeming absence of a more pronounced public acclaim, William’s legacy no doubt was secured by his silent omnipresence in the texts used and commented on by his fellow friar and arguably, the most important theologian of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Aquinas. While the celebrated collaboration between the two Dominicans has been the subject of disputes among scholars,<sup>19</sup> experts do recognize William’s imprint in several of Aquinas’ works: the *Summa Contra Gentiles*; his last two polemical works in Paris (*On the Unity of the Intellect against the Averroists* and *On the Eternity of the World*); his commentary of the Neo-platonic text *On the Book of Causes*; as well as the Aristotelian commentaries which Aquinas undertook as an apostolate for the University of Paris’s Faculty of the Arts. Thanks to William’s translation, Aquinas managed to trace the late Neo-platonic philosopher Proclus as the real author of the *Book of Causes* which in previous times had been erroneously attributed to Aristotle.<sup>20</sup> To some extent, the William-Aquinas connection may be seen as an extension of an earlier, organic collaboration between Albert the Great and Thomas of Cantimpré in the area of zoology. Buellens pointed out that collaboration of this kind was rooted in the Dominicans’ approach to intellectual ministry which he described as “collective”<sup>21</sup> in spirit.

As a friar scholar and professional translator, William thrived in doing his projects under the radar. This disposition towards working in the most hidden environment possible partly explains the aura of near anonymity surrounding his persona. The only revealing mark identifiable

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

with William would probably be his own colophon in the parchments he had worked on, but this traditional medieval insignia was more symbolic than biographical. His personal history is so obscure that scholars today remain clueless as to the particulars of either his birth or death. Beullens attempted to provide a reconstructive account of William's origins in Chapter 6 though much of its content, as he admitted, is a mere patchwork of "conjecture and extrapolation."<sup>22</sup> As it turned out, the only episodes of William's life that one can pin down with some degree of certainty were his engagements "unrelated" to his translation activities: these were his appointment as *penitentiarius* (confessor on behalf of the pope)<sup>23</sup> and his elevation to the bishopric of Corinth.<sup>24</sup> He spent almost his entire adult life rendering difficult ancient texts in Latin but in the end, what we know of the man *historically* was what he did when he was detached from his wordy pursuits. Beullens' book then may be read as an important corrective to the lacuna of information surrounding William's distinguished albeit unsung literary career. One may find in it something akin to William's veritable intellectual portrait framed no less by the re-invention of Europe during the high Middle Ages and the advent of the unearthed Aristotelian texts and other manuscripts from the ancient world. If the medieval period, to paraphrase Bernard of Chartres, were a civilization of dwarves standing on the shoulder of the giants,<sup>25</sup> Beullens, in this book, threw the spotlight on the indispensable role of a translator like William who served as "the stable and durable ladder" which linked the dwarves to the giants in one phenomenal ascent.<sup>26</sup>

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Beullens, Pieter, *The Friar and the Philosopher: William of Moerbeke and the Rise of Aristotle's Science in Medieval Europe* (London: Routledge, 2023).

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.