CHAPTER ONE

ABOUT THIS TEXT

The text to be edited below is an intriguing, fourteenth-century example of
the long tradition of commentaries on a third century AD text, the Isagoge by
Porphyry—or, as it is spelled here, Porphirius. The Isagoge itself was meant
to be an introduction to another, still older and in the course of time even
more vastly commented-upon text, the Categories by Aristotle.

We have to accept a fair amount of uncertainty as to the authorship and
the exact date and place of origin of this text. As is the case with many
fourteenth-century texts, and fourteenth-century philosophy and philoso-
phers in general, hard data on this text are scarce.

That there is only one manuscript available of our text does not make
things easier. There are assumptions to be made about its authorship, and
about its place and date of origin, but none of these things can be said with
absolute certainty.

With some reservations however, which will become clear in the course
of my introduction, I feel safe to assume that this text, a commentary on the
Isagoge in the form of questiones, was composed by Thomas Manlevelt in
the late 1330s or thereabouts in pre-University Louvain. But who is Thomas
Manlevelt?

1.1. Thomas Manlevelt: On First Acquaintance

The one manuscript available of these Questiones libri Porphirii has the
text ascribed to Thomas Manlevelt. A line of text at the top of the first
folio, supposedly put there by the end of the fourteenth century,1 states
that these questiones were compiled by the able doctor Thomas Manlevelt
the Englishman: ‘Hee questiones fuerunt compilate per Thom. Manlevel
Anglicum doctorem solemnem.’ Moreover, the author of these ‘excellent
questions on the Old Logic’ was identified circa 1400 by the manuscript’s first

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1 Schum 1887, 528 f.
cataloguer as Thomas Manlevelt: ‘Item questiones optime Thome Manlevelt super veteri arte.’

In the handbooks of philosophical history, the name of Thomas Manlevelt is linked to a set of widely-used logical treatises, presumably composed in Paris around 1330, and spread all over the European continent in the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Only recently has this logician gained some wider attention. In his 2008 paper ‘Thomas Maulevelt’s Denial of Substance’, Robert Andrews sets out to appraise our author’s ontology, which is described by him as one ‘more radical than any other of the Middle Ages, and unparalleled until the time of Hume’. This would bridge a gap of more than four centuries, as David Hume lived from 1711 until 1776.

The text with which Andrews is concerned, is a commentary (questiones) on Aristotle’s Categories, also ascribed to Thomas Manlevelt. It is one of the lengthiest of the later Middle Ages, surviving in a single, densely-written manuscript of over a hundred folios. The commentary on Porphyry’s Isagoge ascribed to Manlevelt is the twin text to the commentary on the Categories, covering the first forty-odd folios of this very same single, densely-written manuscript.

Andrews has no doubts about the intellectual background of Thomas Manlevelt. To him it is clear that this logician ‘was following in the footsteps of William of Ockham, another Englishman, writing a bit earlier in the beginning of the 1300s’.

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2 Schum 1887, ibid. More about this ascription in the manuscript itself, and on how this compiling should be understood, see below, section 3.1. Chapter 3, of which this section is the first part, is devoted to the textual and circumstantial evidence that seems to warrant the ascription of this text to Thomas Manlevelt. Chapter 6 will give a detailed description of the manuscript.

3 See, for example, Spade 1998, 403 f.

4 Andrews, 2008. This paper was presented at a conference, Skepticism in Medieval and Renaissance Thought, in Uppsala, Sweden, on May 8, 2005. Andrews has a slightly different spelling of our author’s name: ‘Maulevelt’ instead of ‘Manlevelt’. More about the diverse ways in which Thomas’s name is spelled, below, subsection 2.2.5.


6 On Hume, see e.g. D.F. Norton (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Hume (Cambridge, 1993), or any present day reference work. No handbook will be amiss on Hume’s ideas about substance, or the related issue of causation.

7 Andrews 2008, 348. Another early Ockhamist text, the Defensorium Ockham, is discussed in Andrews, 1997 and edited in Andrews, 2000. I will come back to this text in connection with a minor geographical point concerning our own text. See below, section 3.3.