

2018

The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie (2017) by Jonathan S. McIntosh

John Wm. Houghton

The Hill School, numenor@aya.yale.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Houghton, John Wm. (2018) "The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie (2017) by Jonathan S. McIntosh," *Journal of Tolkien Research*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol5/iss1/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Library Services at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Tolkien Research by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

The Flame Imperishable: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of Faërie, by Jonathan S. McIntosh. Kettering, Ohio: Angelico Press, 2017. xvi, 289 pp. \$19.95 (trade paperback). ISBN 9781621383154. [Also available in ebook format.]

This is a remarkably good book, one that will instantly become required reading. McIntosh is, to begin with, not only an insightful student of Thomas Aquinas but also a limpid expositor of the Angelic Doctor's thought (qualities not always found in the same person). At the same time, he knows intimately the Tolkien texts with which he is dealing (chiefly the "Ainulindalë," "Athrabeth Finrod ar Andreth," *Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, and "On Fairy-stories," though he ranges widely through the legendarium) and has an impressive command of philosophy in general, as well as of the secondary literature on both Thomas and Tolkien, adeptly citing Kant, Heidegger and Maritain alongside Shippey and Flieger (full disclosure: the present reviewer is also cited).

The monograph, a revision of the author's 2009 dissertation for the University of Dallas directed by Phillip Roseman, comprises an Introduction, five chapters, and a brief "Final Theme." A portion of the third chapter, McIntosh notes, was previously published in *Music in Middle-earth*, edited by Heidi Steimel and Friedhelm Schneidewind (Zollikofen: Walking Tree, 2010); it appeared under the title "*Ainulindalë: Tolkien, St. Thomas, and the Metaphysics of the Music*," pp. 53-74.

The Introduction (1-28) establishes, cogently, the grounds for considering Tolkien as a metaphysician and as a Thomist, and sets out the plan for the rest of the book.

Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* begins, not with his influential arguments for the existence of God (the "Five Ways"), but rather with an analysis of the concepts of theology and revelation, building the logical foundation on which a discussion of the existence of God can take place. In a somewhat similar fashion, McIntosh discusses the role of faith and reason for each of his authors at the beginning of his first chapter, "The Metaphysics of Eru" (29-72), before turning, again following Thomas's road map, to discussions of the existence of God, God's nature in general, God's presence in the world, Tolkien's idea of *eucaastrophe*, and the specific issue of God's nature as the holy Trinity.

To examine just one aspect of this rewardingly dense discussion, consider the fourth section of the chapter, "Eru: Plotinian One or Thomistic *Esse*?" (50-55). On the one hand, partly because sections of a translation of / commentary on the Neoplatonist *Enneads* of Plotinus circulated in the Muslim world under the entirely misleading title *The Theology of Aristotle*, Aquinas's new Aristotelian philosophy and theology, transmitted in part by writers like al-Ghazali and Moses Maimonides, placed great emphasis (whether positive or negative) on the idea of

God as the transcendent One. On the other, Tolkien's identification of the creator as Eru, immediately glossed as "the One," has given rise to much discussion about the degree to which he means to follow Plotinus and the Neoplatonists. The difficulty for medieval thinkers in the Abrahamic traditions was that a Neoplatonic God was, so to speak, *too* transcendent, so disconnected from the creation as to defy accommodation to their scriptural narratives (in particular, the pagan Neoplatonists held that the One "creates" only in the sense that by thinking on Itself it emanates being). Thomas held that God does not *transcend* being, but rather *is* Being, self-subsistent being-itself. God is that whose essence is to exist, and precisely in this God transcends the creation, every part of which necessarily derives its existence from God. Tolkien, McIntosh argues, represents exactly this system with his references to the Flame Imperishable, depicted in *Ainulindalë* as the power "to bring into Being" (*Silmarillion* 16) which is with Eru alone and which Eru sends to burn at the heart of the world when he says, "Eä," "let it be." Tolkien's comments on the "Athrabeth," McIntosh shows, underline the point. As to why Tolkien would picture the creative power of Being under the image of fire, McIntosh points to various biblical instances, such as the pillar of fire in Exodus and the appearance of the Spirit in Pentecostal tongues of flame in Acts: particularly likely to have influenced Tolkien, however, McIntosh suggests, is the initial theophany to Moses at Mount Sinai, where God declares his name to be "I AM WHO I AM" (Exodus 3:14, the key text for seeing God as absolute Being), speaking out of a bush which is burning and yet never consumed.

In the second chapter, "The Metaphysics of the Ainur" (73-118), McIntosh might be expected to take up the topic of angelology, but he in fact postpones that discussion largely for chapter four, considering instead the threefold issue of divine knowledge, will, and power. Again, to single out one point as an example of the whole: If God's self-knowledge does not simply result in the emanation of the world, as the Neoplatonists would have said, does God have ideas about what the world should be, "exemplars" that God follows in the act of creation? And if so, how can having a multitude of ideas be consonant with God's transcendent simplicity? Thomas's answer is that in knowing himself, God also knows all the ways in which God could be known by creatures, and thus also knows what sorts of creatures would do the knowing, and, further, knows himself as creator. Thus, as Maimonides had pointed out, God knows the world through his planning of it, not through observation; but, in contrast to a builder or an artist who works according to a design, whether expressed or internalized, God's plan for creation is simply knowledge of himself. The Ainur, McIntosh demonstrates, well reflect this Thomistic model of creaturely knowing and being known: themselves the "offspring of [Eru's] thought," they at first "comprehended only that part of the mind of Ilúvatar from which he came" (*Silmarillion* 15); and when they first see

the Children of Ilúvatar “they saw the mind of Ilúvatar reflected anew, and learned yet a little more of his wisdom” (*Silmarillion* 18).

Chapter three, “The Metaphysics of the Music and the Vision” (119-156), begins with a survey of ideas about music and creation in the antique world down through Boethius, then presents an “account of Thomas’s views on music, beauty, and the realism of created being” (137)—the last point being (to paraphrase Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Ia.18.4 ad 3) that the actual existence of a creature *realizes its nature* even more truly than the otherwise more noble idea of the creature in the mind of God. In contrast to the subjectivism inherent in Kant’s proffer of a “disinterested” aesthetic sense, Thomas’s understanding of beauty has an irreducible objective component. McIntosh then analyzes both the Music of the Ainur and their Vision of Eä, giving (it seems to me) more attention to the vision than have other commentators. In particular, he points out that it is the Vision, rather than the Music, which evokes in the Ainur a Thomistic and Tolkienian desire that what they have designed should have real being (145-149). In a fifth section, the chapter returns to the question of *eucaastrophe*, already touched on in the discussion of Eru in chapter one, observing that Tolkien’s remarks (in “On Fairy-stories”) about the Incarnation are precisely a claim that in that one case God has in fact done for human story-telling what Eru does for the Music of the Valar, that is, raised it to the level of primary reality (154-155).

With the fourth chapter (157-202), McIntosh focuses more specifically on “The Metaphysics of the Valar.” The opening chapters of Genesis famously omit any reference to the creation of the angels, leaving Jewish and Christian thinkers to speculate as to the history and function of these spiritual powers. Both traditions had been willing to read “Let us make man in our own image” (Genesis 1:26) as spoken to angelic assistants; however, given the Neoplatonists’ doctrine of the Demiurge and emphasis on the transcendent One, both Jews and Christians came to stress the absolutely singular nature of God as Creator. Aquinas eventually concludes that angels can at most be *makers*, instruments for shaping what God creates, and Tolkien’s Valar accord with this principle. In depicting them as “fictional embodiments of [his] theory of subcreation” (185), however, Tolkien gives their making far wider scope than Aquinas would have allowed (thus giving them some formal similarities to the Demiurge).

The chapter does contain one of the very few inconsistencies in the book. While discussing the physical embodiments of the Valar (which, he points out, reflect a Cartesian sense of mind-body dualism, unlike the Thomistic, hylomorphic picture of *fëa* and *hröa* in elves and men), McIntosh says that it is a “necessity” that the Valar “assume physical bodies” (192), though the following discussion makes it clear that, though they are bound to the world, bodies are not a necessity: the Valar generally put them on or off like clothing, Melkor being the notable exception.

In the last major part of his discussion (Chapter Five, “The Metaphysics of Melkor,” 203-260), McIntosh turns to ponerology, surveying the considerable literature on Tolkien’s understanding of evil. In particular, he argues that Tolkien can be best understood as holding a Thomistic position which sees evil specifically in light of the doctrine of creation, emphasizing that the privation of evil is precisely a privation of created being, a creature’s “failure to achieve its goodness” (216). This Thomistic understanding would thus be distinguished both from the dualist conception for which Tom Shippey has influentially argued and from what Neal Keese and I have claimed is a Boethian interpretation (211). In a very effective analysis, McIntosh devotes the bulk of the chapter to examination of a “hierarchy of evil” in Tolkien’s thought: evil in connection with “creation, sub-creation, preservation, domination, and annihilation” (217).

In his final theme, “Of Metaphysics and Myth” (261-266), McIntosh, having considered so many ways in which Thomas can cast new light on Tolkien, asks whether Tolkien can add anything to our understanding of Aquinas, whether he “might . . . help us to recover the kind of metaphysical insight possessed by St. Thomas” (263). Citing a comment I once made about the theological task of “remythologizing,” McIntosh concludes that

Tolkien offers an implicit validation of Thomas’s project by translating the creation metaphysics of Christian philosophy back into the mythic mode . . . what Tolkien gives us is not one more dialectical treatise *arguing* that faith and philosophy have met and *mythos* and *logos* have kissed, but a radically fresh vision of the world, in which we might *see* and experience how these things are so. (265, emphasis in the original)

McIntosh himself has, I think, provided a “radically fresh vision” of Tolkien’s creation myth and its philosophical background: the book is lively, challenging and important, deserving of the highest commendation.

John Wm. Houghton
The Hill School
Pottstown, Pennsylvania