



Book-Review:

*The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of
J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George
MacDonald*

T. May Stone

Rhone, Zachary A. *The Great Tower of Elfland: The Mythopoeic Worldview of J.R.R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, G. K. Chesterton, and George MacDonald*. Kent State UP, 2017. ISBN 978-1-60635-329-5.

Mythopoeia usually refers to the sort of myth-making that happens when fictional worlds include their own fictional (mythic) canons, but Zachary A. Rhone presents a modified sense of the term in this valuable new study of Christian Humanist literary criticism. Other than noting the usual lines of chronological overlap between the authors, Rhone does not go so far as to assert any coordinated effort or collusion between them – after all, as he says, their combined lifetimes span from 1824 to 1973 (96). The study’s worthwhile central tenet, however, is the confluence of authorial intent for these four major British fantasy writers. Rhone therefore grounds his study in biographical literary criticism while always carefully noting his four authors’ own attitudes toward such criticism (33–34). Rhone attributes to these four fantasy authors the common philosophy of Christian Humanism, although he chooses not to make that point explicit until his final chapter; likewise, Rhone also waits until the final pages of his study before making explicit his specialized definition of mythopoeia as “literary and philosophical myth that reaches toward original myth to reveal divine truth” (120). Despite this unorthodox method of arranging his argument, the results certainly seem to justify it – his method allows him to “present the pieces in order to understand the whole” (12). This structure also allows Rhone to first establish the specific nuances of Christian philosophy important to these authors, as well as how these elements interweave into a structure that transcends conventional Christianity by extending it or building onto it what Rhone outlines as the idea of mythopoeia as a way to God – in Rhone’s analogy, these fantasy authors enact mythopoeia by building

a tower in Elfland that readers might use to climb to God. The mythopoeic worldview that these authors share understands language as a sort of path back to God, Rhone argues, and holds myth as a method to draw closer to God and to effect positive change in the fallen world.

The introduction provocatively asserts that one worldview unites Tolkien, Lewis, Chesterton, and MacDonald but declines to spell it out until the final chapter, titled “The Overarching Hypothesis”, which one could simply read first. The introduction also offers an engaging, succinct overview of each author’s life and life’s work, which invites a non-scholarly audience and sets up the first four chapters, which each presents a major theme that Rhone argues that the four authors’ personal philosophies share. Rhone carefully knits together a synthesis of the theme in each author’s work, both fiction and non-fiction. The first chapter, “Language and Literature”, may possibly have the broadest appeal across scholarly fields. It lays out the authors’ opinions about the origin of language (divine), its current use (fallible, broken), and finally its purpose (to lead to truth/God). As Rhone’s goal in *The Great Tower of Elfland* is to point to a common purpose in the work of Tolkien, Lewis, Chesterton, and MacDonald, this first, foundational chapter examines their shared belief that, because language is divine, its ultimate purpose should be to lead one to God (who is truth). The equation between God, who is transcendental truth, and language, which expresses truth – or, in human usage, attempts with variable success to express truth – is fundamental to Rhone’s argument for the authors’ shared mythopoeia. Rhone squarely addresses the apparent paradox involved in these authors’ choices to express transcendental, Christian truth through myth and fairy tale, contra mimesis, offering a valuable summary of these fantasists’ defenses of fantastic fiction: Elfland provides a space “where truth can play out without unnecessary constraints” in a way not possible in the sort of literary realism that might be expected of Christian authors (22). Of additional interest to scholars of the fantastic is Rhone’s synthesis of the unique manner in which these authors integrate Coleridge’s Primary and Secondary Imagination into their own creative formulation of Christian mythopoeia.

Following the first chapter’s epistemological focus, Chapter Two, “All That Is Human”, canvases the authors’ ontological philosophies, or rather, which particular elements of Christian Humanist ontology play particularly significant roles within these authors’ mythopoeia: reliance on human reason, belief in an immortal soul, and acceptance of the world’s fallen nature. Chapter Three, “The Journey”, describes the human course of progress (in both an individual and collective sense) with a fascinating focus on the classical philosophical paradox of the negotiation between fate and free will in human action – and also this paradox writ large, on a societal level: the idea of a collective human destiny versus the equally important concept of individual freedom. Throughout this chapter runs “the motif of paths and roads to symbolize the human journey through free will decisions and accompanying fate”, a tangible symbol with which to think through the authors’ compromises in these paradoxical areas (65). What stands out about this chapter is how Rhone deals with his four authors’ most complex concepts with lucid and succinct commentary on the authors’ literary expressions of those concepts. Short, periodic surveys of each of the four authors’ non-fiction texts, including personal correspondence, buttress Rhone’s literary criticism. Chapter Four’s title, “Civilization and Origination”, refers to all four authors’ collective disapproval of modern civilization – broadly meaning the impulse behind civilization and its historic results, the more modern the worse – and their collective agreement

that moving backwards in some aspects of life would advance humanity forwards toward the goal of human perfection.

Rhone knits these strands together in the final chapter, summarizing the authors' shared belief that language is a means to access a higher truth and "that the greatest art should reveal truth which is further up and further in, that humanity's journey should guide them in goodness to goodness, and that a fragmented civilization is not the means to healing" (150). To accomplish this, Rhone argues, each of the authors turned to myth. Believing that to exercise the Secondary Imagination in literary creation is itself to approach closer to a divine state, each of these authors "tried to bring myth and imagination back to a search for divine truth and, in the tradition of original myth-makers, to inspire their listeners to do the same" (120). The final chapter title, "The Overarching Hypothesis", refers not to the fact that it presents the first firmly formulated statement of Rhone's thesis but to what Rhone identifies as the "overarching hypothesis" underlying and motivating each of these four authors' literary careers, a belief that the inherent ills of the human condition "can be redeemed in God" (151). Briefly, Rhone explains the conceit of the study's title: the great tower on top of which MacDonald, Chesterton, Lewis, and Tolkien stand, the tower from which they view everything else, is the particular brand of mythopoeia that Rhone argues belongs to Christian Humanism.

Another paradox appears: "The Great Tower of Elfland" is Christian Humanism. Mythopoeia – in Rhone's sense of the word, wherein myth harkens back to God – describes the purpose and the method (so to speak) of the tower that these authors have built for themselves, but "Elfland" names the material from which the tower is built; Rhone argues that these authors employ elements of the fantastic traditionally regarded as the antithesis of Christianity as a means to gloss and persuade others toward that religion. Rather than reflect confusion, the paradoxes that populate Rhone's study, and his ability to make palpable sometimes impossibly abstract ideas, mark *The Great Tower of Elfland* as a fascinating extension of the already considerable scholarship on these influential writers. At times, Rhone's diction makes evident the academic audience he envisions for his work – a wary reader will need to clear such hurdles as "these binaries exhibit supplementation" – but otherwise Rhone's style is enjoyable and makes for a fairly snappy read (132). Additionally, Rhone's adept embrace of female pronouns in general, as well as his equable ordering of "she and he" and "hers and his", deserves praise. *The Great Tower of Elfland* is a must-read for those who study Tolkien, Lewis, Chesterton, and/or MacDonald, a valuable addition to the library of fantastic literature scholars, and an interesting historical study for the layperson.

Biography: Since her Master's degree in American and British literature at Florida Atlantic University alongside FAU's fantasy literature program, T. May Stone has been interested in the fantastic, which focused her research through a Ph.D. from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in Zombie Studies. Currently, May is completing a book tracing the figure of the zombie through a century of American literature, while teaching fantastic literature as an Assistant Professor of English at the New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell, New Mexico.