"Fantasies of Synthesis"? Victorian Thomism and the Reception of Aeterni Patris
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This paper responds to the claim of Mark D. Jordan that the commendation of St. Thomas as the touchstone of Catholic theology and philosophy in Leo XIII's Aeterni Patris betrays a classically modern "fantasy of synthesis". That is to say, the encyclical letter (and the forms of neo-scholasticism that it helped to engender), according to Jordan, imagines a "synthesis" in St. Thomas' corpus that does not in fact exist. The result of Leo's vision (compounded by the Modernist crisis) was to contribute to a kind of Thomism whose form remained yet un-thought. The form (doubtless an important term for Aquinas) of Thomas' theological itinerary was effaced in the successive rewritings of his theology. This paper addresses this claim and treats specifically the way in which the encyclical was received and interpreted in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It concludes with an ambivalent posture towards the reception of Aquinas mediated by the encyclical: while it generated a genuinely beneficial renewal of interest in the primary texts of Thomas himself, it also generated a kind of illusory "synthesis" that transformed the theological 'itinerary' of Thomas' Summa, for example, into the modern 'map' of the scholastic manuals.