Chapter 1: *The Ballad of the White Horse* by G.K.Chesterton

Companion text: *The Ballad of the White Horse* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2001)

Epic Poetry

Epic poetry is the most ancient literary genre. The *Ballad of the White Horse* is an epic poem, a modern example of this most ancient of forms. At an early point in its composition, Chesterton entitled it the "Epic of the White Horse." In addition to the history of the epic, we shall also look at the history of England as background to the poem.

Some examples of the genre include:
The oldest poem in Western literature—the epic of *Gilgamesh*---which arose in the Sumerian empire. The Sumerians lived in Mesopotamia, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (the heart of present-day Iraq). The epic of Gilgamesh was only discovered in the early nineteenth century. The surviving fragments of the poem date from 2000 B. C., describing events that occurred around 2500 B. C. It was composed between the time that Noah survived the Flood, and God called Abraham out of Ur (about 1500 B. C.). It is the story of the great king Gilgamesh of Uruk (called Erech in Holy Scripture), his friendship with the great hunter Enkidu, his grief over Enkidu's untimely death (caused by the jealousy of the goddess Ishtar), and his journey to discover the secret of immortality from the one man widely believed to have been granted the secret of eternal life—Utnapishtim—who hundreds of years before had been commanded to build a great boat, into which he put two of every kind of animal, and who thus survived the Great Flood. Utnapishtim, by the way, chides Gilgamesh for seeking eternal life. "You can't conquer death," he says; "you can't even conquer sleep!" He proves that Gilgamesh can't even stay awake for seven days. After he fails this test, Utnapishtim sends the king home in new garments. From his quest Gilgamesh gains only the wisdom to be a better king.

Homer, of course, is the poet we think of when we consider the epic poem, and is the source from which the Western tradition has derived the epic. His *Iliad* is the story of the allied Greek victory over the city of Troy (or Ilios, in Greek). The traditional date for the Greek victory is 1250 to 1183 B. C., and the *Iliad* is thought to have been written down about 720 B. C. In the *Iliad*,

which is the Greek national epic, we have the tragedy of the horrible crimes the Greeks commit against themselves and against the Trojans (the sacrifice of Iphegenia, for example, and Achilles dragging the Trojan prince Hector's body three times around the city walls, and the trickery of the Trojan Horse). So even though it's their national epic, the Greeks don't come off looking too good, and nothing but tragedy results from their victory. These resulting later tragedies, like Clytemnestra's revenge upon Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter, like the widows of Troy left to mourn their husbands and their fate, have been played out in multiple variations over the centuries, but primarily they form the basis for the earliest Western dramas—the tragic plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripedes. The pagan Greek gods play a large part in deciding the fortunes of the Greeks and Trojans. After the war, they loom equally large in the voyage of Odysseus, the trickster hero whose wanderings, and his yearning to return home to Ithaca with his treasure, are recounted in the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is thought to date from about 680 B. C.

From Homer, the Latin poet Virgil (70-19 B. C.) took his inspiration for his *Aeneid*, the epic recounting the birth of the Roman Empire. The Trojan prince Aeneas, exiled after the defeat, wandered about in the Mediterranean and came to settle in Italy, called Alba Longa in the poem, where later his descendants Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, were suckled by the she-wolf. The poem includes the manipulations of fortune by the pagan deities, and a visit in the fifth book to the underworld of the dead.

In Northern Europe, the Norse sagas recount the deeds of great heroes, like the Saga of Burnt Njal. This was anonymously composed in the 13th Century A. D. in the Icelandic language, and is the tale of a multi-generational feud. As a result of the feud, in Chapter 128 (there are 158 chapters in all) the hero Njal Thorgeirsson of Bergthorsknoll along with his family is burnt alive in his home by a confederacy of enemies. Other cultures of the north produced their own epics, like the *Mabinogion* of Wales, the Teutonic Ring cycle from which Wagner took the plots of his operas, and the tales of King Arthur which appear to have originated in post-Roman Brittany. The Middle Ages produced also the epic *Chanson de Roland*, the Song of Roland, describing an attack upon the rear guard of Charlemagne's army as it was retreating through the Pyrenees mountains into France. The Song of Roland contains many elements of epic poetry. The way that the Christian kings Arthur and Charlemagne are depicted in

these medieval epics doubtless influenced Chesterton's depiction of King Alfred in the *Ballad of the White Horse*.

During the thirteenth century, the classical Greek and Roman literary works—Homer, Virgil and the Greek dramatists--were being rediscovered in monastic libraries. Universities began to appear in Europe for the education of the clergy, and Catholic men of learning also read these classical works and took them as models. It was thus that Dante Aligheri, in the early fourteenth century, conceived of the greatest Christian poem, the *Commedia Divina*, or Divine Comedy, in which the poet Dante tours Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, accompanied part of the way by the poet Virgil. Virgil, the great pagan poet, is inspiration and guide for Dante's writing and his guide through the Inferno and part of Purgatory; he cannot ascend beyond a certain point because he was not Christian, and therefore beyond this point Dante takes as his guide the beautiful virgin Beatrice, for whom he long held a chivalric, platonic affection.

A Protestant epic poem was *Paradise Lost*, written in the 1600s by the English Puritan poet John Milton. When I read it, I found it dull, and rather dry, and now I know why. Not because it is an imitation of classical epic, but because it is an example of how heretical dogma leads to inferior literature. The subject matter is the Creation and the Fall of Man. Milton's problem is that, given that he holds heretical beliefs about the innate depravity of Man since the Fall, he can't really give Adam the hope of becoming a saint in Heaven, as Catholics believe he is. Milton's Adam is therefore not a very interesting character. But since an epic needs a hero, and since Milton's character Satan is so much more interesting than his Adam, then by default, by way of filling the vacuum, his readers, especially modern ones, make Satan the "real" hero of *Paradise Lost*. Satan, for example, declares "The mind is its own place, and in itself, can make a heaven of hell, and a hell of heaven." This kind of rebellious attitude toward reality prefigures that of the Romantic revolutionaries, and the Romantic poets saw Milton's Satan as a rebel like themselves. The early 19th century heterodox poet William Blake was the first to take this approach, followed by the atheist Percy Bysshe Shelley, who declared that "Milton was of the devil's party without knowing it." This is, of course, true, but not in the sense that Shelley meant.

Here is the definition of the epic poem:

- It must be large in scope—covering a panorama of time and space.
- It must have serious subject matter—the deeds of a great hero, the founding of a nation, the structure of the cosmos.
- It must show supernatural beings involved in the affairs of men—guiding the hero or the nation.
- It must be written in an elevated style.

As we read Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*, consider how it fulfills these requirements.

It covers one end of England to the other.

It deals with the great king Alfred, and his heroic efforts to save Christian England from the pagan Danes.

It includes Alfred's visions of Our Lady, whose apparition directly inspires him to action.

The style—is not as elevated as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and was criticized by some, notably T. S. Eliot, for not being elevated enough. But a popular style, like that of the old popular medieval ballads, was what Chesterton was aiming at.

This poem needs **historical notes** for us to understand fully Alfred and the desperate situation of the Kingdom of Wessex in 878 A. D. Here is the history: The Romans lost their grip on Britain about 400 A. D., and it broke up into a multitude of Christian and pagan kingdoms. In the seventh century (A. D. 600), it was re-evangelized by St. Augustine and his companions, and had briefly begun to reunite in about the year 800, a revival that coincided, on the European continent, with the dawn of a baptized empire under Charlemagne, the dawn of Christendom. But Charlemagne had died in 814, and during the latter part of the century, Christian rulers in Europe were left to defend their nations on their own. From the south, the Muslims threatened Italy and the papal states. From the north, the Danes (whom we would call Vikings, since they were from the entire area of Scandinavia), attacked the islands of Great Britain. They murdered priests and plundered churches and burnt down the cities.

London was attacked many times by Vikings coming up the Thames. In 871-872, it was occupied the entire winter. In the ensuing years they occupied the whole island of England, except for Wessex, which was Alfred's kingdom. In January 878 the Danes made a surprise attack upon Chippenham, taking Alfred's kingdom away from him. He withdrew to the Island of Athelney, spending the months of Lent raising an army for a counter attack. After Easter (March 23), Arthur led an army consisting of his own men and allies from Somersetshire, Hampshire, and Wiltshire, against the entire Danish army at Ethandune in Wiltshire, and was victorious. King Guthorm agreed to leave the Kingdom of Wessex alone (Wessex is due west of London, which is in Middlesex) and he gave Alfred men from his army to keep as hostages. If Guthorm broke his promise, then Alfred could kill the hostages. But Alfred also wanted Guthorm to accept Christianity; Guthorm agreed, and this too was made part of the treaty. The raids on the coastline continued, so that Alfred needed to have London again to defend Wessex. By the treaty of Wedmore (886 A. D.), London returned to English hands. The Vikings withdrew to lands in the east and southeast of England. These Viking lands are known as the Danelaw, because they were subject to Danish law, and the boundary is from the northeast corner of Wales diagonally down to London. After this defeat, the Vikings began to be civilized. Their raids continued, but they were no longer mortal blows.

Alfred, the White Horse, and Chesterton

Alfred was born in the year 849 at Wantage in Berkshire, and so would have been familiar with the White Horse of Berkshire vale all his life. He was the fifth son of Æthelwulf, King of Wessex, and his queen Osburh. A legend about him says that his father took Alfred when he was four years old to Rome, where he was anointed king by Pope Leo IV. The truth is that the father did make a pilgrimage to Rome two years later, taking Alfred with him, but nothing is said in the *Life of Alfred* by the historian Asser that Alfred was anointed king by the Pope. In any case, Alfred was the fourth of Æthelwulf's sons to rule after his death. He was married in 868 and came to the throne in 871. The ransom he paid to the Danes, who were then threatening Wessex, bought him peace for only a few years. In 875 they renewed their attacks and finally in 878 they conquered the whole of England. The most famous legends about him, which are supposed to have taken place during the struggle in the year 878, were incorporated by

Chesterton into the *Ballad of the White Horse*: Alfred came in disguise to the hut of an old woman, who asked him to watch her cakes baking on the hearth, and he let them burn and was scolded for it; he went in disguise to play the harp in the camp of the Danes. There is no tradition that he had a vision of Our Lady; this is Chesterton's devout invention. Contemporary historians attributed the victory to the intervention either of St. Neot or St. Cuthbert. There is a legend, however, that Our Lady appeared in London on her birthday (8 Sept) in 994 to prevent Danish raiders from sacking the city, and that they were subsequently converted. This event was apparently in Chesterton's mind.

Chesterton incorporated into his poem a Saxon brooch that was discovered in 1693 at Newton Park, some four miles from Athelney. Round the central cloisonné enamel portrait of a king is an inscription worked in gold, reading in Saxon: "Alfred had me worked." In the poem, Chesterton has Alfred casting this brooch at Our Lady's feet, to be found and marvelled at centuries later.

Photo 1 Front of Brooch (replica)

Photo 2: Back of Brooch (replica)

Alfred died in the year 900 or 901. Within ten years the Saxons established supremacy in the south of England. After his death, and with the establishment of Saxon civilization, the other achievements of Alfred began to take hold. He is the only English king styled “the Great.” He is credited with entrenching the custom of trial by jury and the law of “frank pledge,” although these had already been customary in Saxon law. Not only did Alfred codify and promulgate laws, but he looked, too, to their enforcement, and insisted that justice should be dispensed without fear or favour. He devoted his energies to restoring what had been destroyed by the long wars with the invaders. Monasteries were rebuilt and founded, and learned men brought from other lands. He brought Archbishop Plegmund and Bishop Wetfrith from Mercia; Grimbold and John the Old-Saxon from other Teutonic lands; the historian Asser, who later wrote a life of King Alfred, John Scotus Erigena and many others. He not only encouraged men of learning, but he laboured himself and gave proof of his own learning. He translated into Anglo-Saxon: "The Consolation of Philosophy" of Boëthius; "The History of the World" of Orosius; the "Ecclesiastical History of the English People" of the Venerable Bede (672/3-735), and the "Pastoral Rule" and the "Dialogues" of St. Gregory the Great.

The "Consolation of Philosophy," a work by the Christian Roman Boëthius, was widely read in the early Middle Ages. Boethius, of noble birth and a counselor to king Theodoric, was accused by his enemies of treason against Rome and thrown into prison. His appeals went unheard, and the king had

him executed. While in prison, he wrote the *Consolation*, which calls for resignation in the face of suffering since Boëthius believed that fate has predetermined everything. It is hard to gather Boethius' Christian faith from the *Consolation*, although there are passages in the treatise which seem plainly to hint that, after philosophy has poured out all her consolations for the benefit of the prisoner, there are more potent remedies (*validiora remedia*) to which he may have recourse. Alfred not only translated but adapted Boëthius, adding much of his own, including his Christian gloss on the idea of fate: "I say as do all Christian men, that it is a divine purpose which rules, and not fate." The "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle", the record of the English race from the earliest time, was inspired by him, and was continued until the Norman Invasion of 1066. Thus Chesterton has reason to portray Alfred as a philosopher and an historian, combining this philosophical bent with a tendency to absent-mindedness (by which he is able to suggest why Alfred left the old woman's cakes to burn).

There are two white horses on English hillsides, and Chesterton has chosen to place Ethandune, the site of the battle, in Berkshire near the White Horse of Berkshire vale, even though he knew that the battle more likely took place near Chippenham in Wiltshire. Even though there is a similar white horse at Westbury in Wiltshire, Chesterton chose for his poem the Berkshire white horse. This image, which is best seen from the opposite side of the valley, dates from prehistoric times **(see Figure 4 below)**. The soil under the turf is white and chalky, so that by plucking up the vegetation, digging a trench, and filling it with chalk, its pagan creators made the white image show through. The trench is about a yard deep, and filled almost up with chalk. In the poem the white horse is a symbol of England, civilised England, which must be preserved in every generation, or weeds and tares will take it over. In the poem, when the people are keeping the image plucked white, England is prosperous and at peace; but when it is overgrown, England is in peril. So every generation of English men must preserve their civilisation from the barbarians. Chesterton may well have known of the apparition of St. James the Greater riding a white horse in the year 834, when the armies of the Spanish King Ramiro I engaged in battle at Clavijo the armies of the Muslim Abdurrahman II; an apparition of Saint James appeared on a white horse leading the Christians into battle. For the many Moors slain in battle that day he is called Santiago Matamoros (killer of Moors). White horses were for Chesterton a powerful imaginative symbol. Recall the use Tolkien made of the white horse Shadowfax in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Photo 3: The White Horse of Berkshire Vale

Chesterton the Man and Author

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in 1874 and died in 1936. He was born in London to Edward Chesterton, an auctioneer and estate agent, and his wife Marie-Louise. Chesterton did not learn to read until he was eight years old. He studied at University College in London and at art school; he flirted with ouija boards and grew fascinated with diabolism, then left school and went to work for a publisher. His essays began appearing in many publications and he founded his own periodical, *G. K.'s Weekly*. In the late 1890s he met his future wife, Frances Blogg, and it was she to whom he dedicated the *Ballad of the White Horse*, and to whom he credits his return to the Anglican, and, in 1922, to the Roman Catholic faith.

Photo 4: G.K. Chesterton. (1874-1936)

Chesterton's output is enormous. He is the author of 100 books, and volumes and volumes of poems, essays, and short stories. He wrote on an enormous variety of subjects, and is best known for his Father Brown detective stories, and his work with Hilaire Belloc on economic and political issues. Following the promulgation of the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*

in 1891, the young Chesterton had been attacking socialists, particularly George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, in print—see his book *Heretics*, which is largely an attack upon them. Chesterton and Belloc founded the Distributist movement, calling for local control of economic institutions, and that private property should be divided into the smallest possible freeholds and then distributed throughout society. Chesterton debated Shaw and Wells publicly on social principles, opposing socialism with Catholic social teaching. Chesterton will probably be best remembered for his Father Brown stories, and his works on faith: *Orthodoxy*, *The Everlasting Man*, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, and his *Autobiography*. And, of course, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, which was written in 1911, the year the first Father Brown collection appeared. Chesterton cut an unforgettable figure: of enormous girth, with a great walrus moustache, a monocle, a voluminous greatcoat and rumpled hat; he was constantly reading and constantly forgetting where he laid his books and papers.

Sidebar: Poetic Meter and Poetic Form

By the meter is meant the 'beat' of the poem. The form of the poem has to do with the number of lines in a stanza, the length of the lines, and the sequence of rhyming lines.

Meter is counted in 'feet.' The **iambic foot** is the most commonly used in English poetry: An iambic meter has the following beat—one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable:

Before the gods that made the gods
Had seen their sunrise pass
The White Horse of the white horse vale
Was cut out of the grass.

This iambic foot is written schematically like this: ∪/
When we diagram the poetic line it is called **scanning** the meter.

The number of feet in a line is important to the form of the poem. The ballad stanza has four iambic feet in the first line, and three iambic feet in the second line. Four iambic feet per line is called Iambic Tetrameter (Tetra=four in Greek); three iambic feet per line is called Iambic Trimeter (Tri=three in Greek).

One iambic foot per line: Iambic Monometer (I don't know of too many examples!)
Two iambic feet per line: Iambic Dimeter
Three iambic feet per line: Iambic Trimeter
Four iambic feet per line: Iambic Tetrameter
Five iambic feet per line: Iambic Pentameter (most of Shakespeare's plays are written in this meter)
Six iambic feet per line: Iambic Hexameter (lines don't get much longer than this).

The **ballad stanza** is written in iambic tetrameter (four beats per line) alternating with iambic trimeter (three beats per line).

This ballad stanza has the following rhyme scheme: **abcb**. 'A' stands for the rhyming sound at the end of the first line. If the rhyming sound of the second line is different from 'A,' it is called 'B.' If the rhyming sound of the third line is different from both 'A' and 'B,' it is called 'C,' and so on.

Many variations on this basic stanza form are possible. Chesterton's *The Ballad of the White Horse* is written in ballad stanzas, which we can tell by his use of only two rhyming sounds per stanza, and his alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter lines. Chesterton, however, has produced a variation on the ballad stanza, typically with five lines per stanza.

Sidebar: Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Anglo-Saxon poetry (such as *Beowulf)* is written in a very different form. The verse unit is the single line, and the lines do not rhyme. Instead of counting unstressed and stressed syllables, only the stressed syllables are counted. There are typically four (very strong) stresses per line. The stresses are emphasized by **alliteration** (words that begin with the same sound). Each line is divided in half by a strong pause, called a **caesura**. In the first half-line, the stressed words alliterate with the first stressed word in the second half-line.

Cædmon's Hymn was written between 658 and 680. The story of its creation is told by the Venerable Bede. Cædmon, a Northumbrian layman, had all his life felt incompetent at the art of verse. When the harp would go around the table after dinner, so that each guest might contribute a song,

Cædmon always slipped away before his turn came. One night when he had thus avoided singing, Cædmon fell asleep in the stable where he had gone to tend the animals. He dreamed that an angel came to him and said: "Cædmon, sing me something." When Cædmon protested that he didn't know what to sing, the angel said: "Sing about the beginning of things." Cædmon at once began singing the Hymn. Upon awaking, Cædmon not only remembered the Hymn, but, Bede tells us, was able to express any given sacred topic in excellent poetry after only a few hours of work. He became a monk and devoted his life to the composition of Christian verse.

CÆDMON'S HYMN

Nu sculon herigean	heofonrices Weard
Now we must praise	Heaven-kingdom's Guardian,
Meotodes meahte	and his modge[th]anc
The Creator's might	and his mind-plans,
weore Wuldor-Fæder	swa he wundra gehwæs
the work of the Glory-Father	when he of wonders of every one,
ece Drihten	or onstealde
Eternal Lord,	the beginning established.
He ærest sceop	ielda bearnum
He first created	for men's sons
Heofon to hrofe	halig Scyppend
Heaven as a roof,	holy Creator;
ða middangeard	moncynnes Weard
then middle-earth	mankind's Guardian,
ece Drihten	æfter teode
eternal Lord,	afterwards made—
firum foldan	Frea aelmihtig
for men earth,	Master almighty.

The Three Men: Eldred, Mark and Colan

Alfred, buoyed up after meeting Our Lady, sings as he travels north toward the estuary of the Severn river in search of Eldred the Saxon. Alfred needs the help of all the Christians to drive out the pagan Danes.

Eldred is a Franklin, a substantial landholder but not a nobleman. Eldred is a man of hospitality. But he has grown weary of fighting the Danes. Out of nine battles in 871, only Englefield and Ashdown were clearly Saxon victories. Eldred does not want to do what is painful and severe; we see his weariness in the way he has let his farm go untended. He wants comforts and certainties. (note: we are at war today, against the enemies of the Church. How many Eldreds want to be left alone to tend their gardens, grown weary of the fight?)

Alfred repeats to him Our Lady's words: 'No more of comfort shall ye get.' And evidently they change Eldred's mind, for he reaches again for his old sword, and will summon Alfred's Saxon allies.

Mark is a Roman. Unlike Eldred's, his farm is organized, betelling his disciplined and martial spirit. Alfred does not know Mark as well as he knows Eldred. Mark is a remnant of the high tide of Roman civilization, whereas Eldred is a Saxon like himself. Alfred introduces himself humbly, as "that oft-defeated king," and acknowledges that he has bought peace from the Danes with gold. Then he repeats the words of Our Lady. Mark, too, has vines he needs to tend at home, but he knows Alfred's strategic situation, and tells Alfred what he must do. Alfred declares that Mark is a man so true to his word that he would vouch for him on Judgment Day. (note: in our present war against the enemies of the Church, what kind of ally would Mark be? He would not be, perhaps, like us Americans—maybe he speaks a different language?)

Colan is a Celt, of a race that inhabited Britain far longer than either Roman or Saxon. When St. Patrick converted them, they were nature-worshipers, and some had retained even to Chesterton's time small superstitions from their paganry. The Celts were Christians before the pagan Saxons invaded, and it was they who retreated into the Welsh mountains to preserve their lives and their faith when Alfred's ancestors were destroying their churches. Now comes Alfred, this latter-day Christianized Saxon, asking for help to drive out the pagan Danes. Alfred humbles himself before Colan even more

than he had before Mark: "I am Alfred of Wessex, and I am a conquered king." And Colan replies with haughty pride. But Alfred is not angered; he merely repeats the words of Our Lady. As with Eldred and Mark, these words convince Colan too. The fables referred to in the last stanzas of Book II include such stories at the Irish king Cuchulain, who fought with his sword against the rising tide (as in a famous poem by William Butler Yeats). In the current war against the Church's enemies, what kind of ally would Colan be?

Preparation for the Battle (Books III through V)

Book III: The Harp of Alfred

Book III is the philosophical heart of the poem. Here at last Alfred (in disguise) gets to preach to the Danes. We are introduced to three Danes who stand in contrast to the three allies of Alfred we met in Book II. Whereas the allies of Alfred were united in their love of God and faith in Our Lady's word, these three Danes are united in their despair. Their despair takes different forms, which we recognize today in the enemies of the Church (Chesterton was trying to make us draw the comparison). Also we see some of the traits of King Guthrum that make him ripe for conversion.

They encounter Alfred and drag him in disguise to the Danish camp. Alfred sings a song from the days that the Anglo-Saxons were first raiding England. The next to sing is **Harold**, the King's nephew:

Harold is a **hedonist**. He lives to please his appetites. He is like the youth culture of today that cannot understand why we Christians should deny ourselves pleasure. The Norse god Loki, the trickster, was beloved of the other gods, and always came out on top, but we worship a God who got nailed by the Romans to a cross. Note: the Norse gods are somewhat like the Greek and Roman pagan deities, in that they have human failings and are not omnipotent. The Norsemen believed that the gods will be destroyed by evil powers at the end of the world (Ragnarök, or in German Götterdämmerung). Despair follows when all the appetites are jaded.

Guthrum dismisses the song of Harold as the bellowing of a boy. The next to sing is Elf, the minstrel:

Elf is a **sentimentalist**. He is sad because there is no security. His gods are superior beings, yet like humans they forget to do things (as Balder's mother forgot to ask the mistletoe not to hurt him), and so even Balder, the noblest and gentlest of the Norse gods, was killed through a sneaky scheme of Loki. In the pagan Greek myth, we have the nymph Thetis dipping the infant Achilles into a stream to make him invulnerable, and yet she forgets that she is holding him by his heel, and this will ever after be his weak spot. Implicit in the sentimentalist world view is the idea that if we only knew what was necessary for our security, we would never have tragedy in our lives. Despair follows when we realize that time and chance happens to us all. In the Woody Allen movie "Sleeper," after 200 years the sleeper is revived from a deep freeze, and the doctors tell him that all his friends are dead. He exclaims, in the movie's funniest line, "But they all ate organic rice!"

Next to sing is Ogier, the earl. Ogier is a **nihilist**. He is angry at the gods and wants them destroyed, since he can no longer enjoy a young man's pleasures. He is weary of existence, and finds black joy in destruction. This is naked despair; nihilism is the most alarming of today's manifestations of it.

Guthrum advises Ogier to await fate patiently, whatever his end may be. Guthrum then takes the harp and sings that he is weary of life. He is seeking to believe, but he will believe in anything, even evil gods. Why must the gods die? As a pagan, he cannot find an answer. He can forget death only at those times when it is closest, when he is in battle.

All this despair makes Alfred impatient. He seizes his harp and preaches to them, saying, it is not through the fault of the gods that you suffer, but through the fall of Adam. Alfred declares that, fallen though he be, his heart is in better shape than all of theirs, whose gods have brought them nothing but despair. Chesterton then has Alfred explain the Christian world view in a series of paradoxes (Chesterton was a lover of paradox, and it is characteristic of his literary style). "You are more tired of victory, than we are tired of shame." "Our monks go robed in rain and snow, / But the heart of flame therein." "If it be not better to fast for joy, than feast for misery." Alfred predicts the doom of their paganism "because it is only Christian men guard even heathen things." That is, Christians are no destroyers of order. The cultures that they conquer, they baptize; the Church brings grace to nature, and the sacrifice of the Cross brings new life.

Book IV: The Woman in the Forest

This book illustrates the meekness of Christian kingship. Alfred, still in disguise, leaves the Danish camp, taking careful strategic note of its situation, on his way to meet with Eldred, Mark, Colan and their men. Weary Alfred stops at the home of an old woman; he is so ragged that she, poor as she is, mistakes him for one poorer. Alfred meditates that God is his servant, Who has served him by making for him all of creation, and yet Alfred and all men have served Him by slaying Him who loved the lowliest, lowly like this woman. As he wonders how the poor shall find their way to a little door in heaven, Alfred lets the cakes burn. The woman strikes the unworthy servant, as a king might strike; for a moment Alfred is tempted to strike back. After all, as a king, it is his right. Just then arrive Eldred, Marcus and Colan with their warriors. The comic absurdity of the situation makes Alfred laugh at himself. This "world turned upside down" kind of feeling, comments Chesterton, runs through all kinds of Christian tales that illustrate the absurdity of pride. "He who would be greatest among you must be the servant of all." Now that Alfred has failed at a small thing, and suffered for it, he is not afraid of failing at a greater thing, like the coming battle. It is the humble people, who know what failure is, who have their feet on the ground. The earls of the Danes do not know this secret. Like the righteous arm of God, Alfred and his armies shall strike them down.

Book V: Ethandune: The First Stroke

Chesterton recounts Guthrum's conquests--from Chester to the Humber, to the Thames valley, to Hampshire, to Wessex, where he stood on the height and looked down over the downs to Southampton water. Although Guthrum had conquered England and was well aware that the opposition were now few and weak in spirit, nevertheless he placed his camp on a height so that the enemy could approach only by a single road, up the left hand fork of the path. Alfred's army then advanced, scaring the woodland creatures away (as Stonewall Jackson's brigade flanked the Union army at Chancellorsville, driving small critters before them).

Before they can even see the Danish camp, Alfred's troops halt and lose their courage. Each of them despairs "in the fashion of his blood." The Saxon sorrows for the things he has lost, the Celt for the gods that never were, the Roman turns to black laughter.

Then, after a fashion, Chesterton has the Christians confess their sins before the battle. Alfred sorrows for the sins of his youth. Chesterton is here following the assessment of young Alfred expressed by the 19th-century historian John Lingard: young Alfred, he says, seems to have "considered his high dignity an emancipation from restraint," and even during the struggle with the Danes, he took the leisure to indulge his passions. We learn from more ancient sources that his virtuous kinsman St. Neot censured Alfred for being haughty and unjust to his subjects, and that Alfred himself attributed his kingdom's calamity in the year 878 to his own misconduct. Eldred, too, confesses his sin, of having led a slothful and wasteful life. Colan, however, does not seem to regret the worship of trees—Chesterton seems to regard him as a pagan holdover much like the White Horse itself; he will die a Christian "with a cross upon my clay" yet still hear the voices of the trees (reminiscent of the Ents in the *Lord of the Rings*). Mark fears not death, for all the world is Roman, and all the world therefore is home.

The parley before the battle: Alfred blows the horn, and his army advances. Marcus and Alfred in the center, Eldred on the right flank, and Colan on the left, with the Danes arrayed in a crescent before them, above a palisade, with Guthrum in the center, Elf on his right, and Harold on his left. Harold, the brash youth, taunts Alfred's army, particularly Colan. Colan, he says, is old. An army of scarecrows is hardly worth fighting. Colan, among the Celts, has the only sword, and the rest have neither bow nor slingshot, but only sharpened pikes "ill-made." Harold aims a bow at Colan, but before he can shoot—

Colan hurls his sword at Harold and strikes him dead. Alfred takes this as a sign: "Man shall not taste of victory / Till he throws his sword away." Another of those paradoxes that Chesterton loves so well! Then Alfred and his men all offer Colan their swords, "like a cup / of chrysolite and pearls." This should suggest to us the image of a richly decorated chalice, and the cup of suffering from which the Christians must drink if they are to prevail. This, says Alfred, is the manner of Christian men, "whether of steel or priestly pen," that they must lose what they love most in order to save it. He also compares this battle to the Day of Judgment, when Our Lord shall stride into battle on a red horse (a fiery, bloody, horse, not a white one of peace), armed with one arrow, the one bolt to break apart the heavens and lay bare all souls. Christ's Broken Heart has a personal love for each person; each soul is a target for His arrow of love (these were lines that Chesterton inserted by hand into the poem).

Final Victory?

Book VI: The Slaying of the Chiefs

Book V ends with the sudden, miraculous stroke of Colan against the brash young Harold. Now the heavy fighting begins, and it is as Our Lady foretold to King Alfred: the sky grows darker yet. The warriors fan out right and left on either side of their leaders. Alfred and Guthrum are in the rear of their armies. Colan (the Celt) is on Alfred's left wing, Mark (the Roman) is in front of him in the center, and Eldred (the Saxon) is on the right. Colan faces Harold (the hedonist), Ogier (the nihilist) faces Mark, and Elf (the sentimentalist) faces Eldred. In the text Alfred's left wing faces Guthrum's left wing. Even though this was pointed out to Chesterton, he kept the original wording.

Elf slays Eldred, who initially cut a swath through the Danes, thinking always of home as he mowed them down; then Eldred's sword broke, and he was pierced by seven spears. The seventh and fatal spear was given to Elf by the Rhine Maidens. These are the maidens who figure in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, the final chapter of his Ring of the Niebelungen operas. Geologically speaking, when England was joined to the Continent, the Thames flowed into the Rhine, but now, the rivers are separated "for a sign," and it is in the sunken lost connection between them that the Rhine Maidens dwell. Chesterton puts the Maidens within Hell itself—they are like mermaids, or sirens, that lead sailors to their deaths. Wagner's operas are based on legends that were shared by Saxon and Dane. The Niebelungen dwarves made the Ring; Siegfried the hero obtained it and gave it to Brunnhilde; the Rhine maidens warned him to take the Ring back, and at the end of the world the sea rose up and destroyed the gods, and the Rhine maidens wound up with the Ring.

Marcus rallies the warriors, calling them by name (Wulf, Gorlias, Gurth, Gawen, Halfgar, Halmer). These men are paralysed with fear of Elf's spear; they are superstitious, and believe it has magic powers. "They mixed God with glamoury" (i. e., the false tricks of magic). The precise referents of the "burning tree" and the "wizard's tower and glass" are unknown. Mark is strong because he has faith, and his faith is strong precisely because he **can** reason, but his faith stands above reason. Lines 136ff: "Belief that grew of all beliefs / One moment back was blown" refers to the superstitious faith of

the Saxons; "And belief that stood on unbelief / Stood up iron and alone" refers to Mark's faith that has stood the test of his skeptical reason. Then Mark slays Elf. Mark reminds his troops that God is working through them, God who loves order and the crafts that build civilisation. Mark then quotes Psalms 76:3 and 46:9: "God has broken the might of the bows, the shield, the sword, and the battle."

Then Ogier, the wrathful nihilist, lunges at Mark, but Mark pins him under his round shield like a tortoise. Breaking through the shield, Ogier stabs Mark in the side and kills him. Ogier then exults and cries victory over Rome. His words echo with defiance not only of the Roman empire but the Roman Church, and could easily come from the lips of a modernist of today who rebels against the Church: "How long she stood with her foot on Man / As he with his foot on me." The fury of the North unleashed, says Ogier, shall like a tidal wave drive all before it, until that final battle—Götterdammerung—when Nothing (nihil) shall be victorious, and the Christians shall play no part in it. This battle cry of Ogier goes to the heads of the Danes like drink, and they pour brainless upon Alfred and Colan.

The Christians are pushed back to the fork in the road, and Alfred and Colan are pushed back along separate forks. Alfred can only faintly hear Colan's dying trumpet blast, as Charlemagne could only faintly hear that of Roland (in the *Chanson de Roland*), when Roland, at the rear of Charlemagne's army, was ambushed. Roland died at Roncesvalles (in the Pyrenees) in 778 A. D., defending the Christian cause against the Moors.

Book VII: Ethandune: the Last Charge

Now Chesterton takes us back to the White Horse, and to the image of a small child, playing idly in the white chalk, persistently, patiently, at play. Who is this child? He is innocent, certainly, and humble, and he seems to be eternal, for he saw God separate the sea from the dry land, and all Christians hunger and aspire to reach the heights where the Child sings. Chesterton uses the Christ Child at play to show how Alfred faces adversity. When the "stones of his tower" fall down, Alfred regroups and tries again. Of all his battle chiefs, says Chesterton, Alfred was the most like this Child; he fought "as gravely / as a good child at play." Therefore Alfred is remembered, for his staying power, his dogged persistence, his never accepting a reverse as final—whereas Mark, and Colan and Eldred are forgotten. These three

names, of course, stand for all the nameless chiefs that fought at Alfred's side.

The Danes now believe they have routed Alfred's army, and are off their guard. Alfred blows his horn, and his men freeze at whatever they happen to be doing, and Alfred rallies them. Would you be better off dying in slavery to these Danes, or dying in battle against them? he asks. He compares the work of battle ahead of them to the labour of ploughing, or tending hedges, or falconing, for all are necessary to craft a civilisation. Alfred lifts his father Egbert's horn and tells his men that two blasts sound the charge, but three blasts sound the battle's end.

"And when the last arrow / Was fitted and was flown," Alfred looks up and once more sees Our Lady. These lines echo those of his first vision, when he asked "When our last bow is broken, Queen / And our last javelin cast…Shall we come home at last?" Now she makes clear to him what she had only hinted at before, that he has reason to hope for victory. Seven swords pierce her heart, but as a queen of men, she bears a sword in battle. The lore of Alfred's victory includes two apparitions: one of his kinsman St. Neot, and the other of St. Cuthbert, both of whom predicted his success. But here Chesterton out of love for Our Lady uses the apparition to raise hope in Christians today.

Ogier flings a spear at Alfred, and misses. Ogier hears Alfred's axe just before it splits his head open to the spine. With Ogier dead, the tide turns. Alfred may be speaking in metaphor, or he may be having a mystical vision, of Our Lady walking above the battle, and the Cross going over the sun and moon. Metaphorically, to be sure, the White Horse stamps for joy. Now comes a catalogue of slain chiefs, much like the catalogues of Homer in the *Iliad;* Chesterton lists all the battle chiefs that were slain. Alfred's troops regather; the Celts pipe the funeral dirge of Colan as they bring in his body. At last they tear down Guthrum's battle flag, the Raven of Odin, and Guthrum knows it is over.

With his defeat comes the eternal victory of Guthrum's conversion. Something in his eyes changes, "As when one wise man truly sees / What is more wise than he." In the parting of the woodways there came to him a sign, the sign of St. Hubert, and we set this sign (the Cross) on him to blaze a thousand years. The ways truly parted, and from thence the course of history changed. To Chesterton, the baptism of Guthrum, which took place

three weeks after the battle, was really more significant than the Treaty of Wedmore. The Treaty was only a compromise, and really did not endure. A century later a Danish king like Canute was really ruling in England. But, says Chesterton, “though the Dane got the crown, he did not get rid of the Cross.”

Book VIII: The Scouring of the Horse

Now Wessex is at peace, after the wonder of Guthrum’s conversion. Not until the Day of Judgment shall we behold such amazing things as the change in the eyes of a great man who beholds One greater than he. “There came to his chrism-loosing / Lords of all lands afar”—meaning that now Guthrum’s allies from far lands are also receiving the sacraments. The line of the Danelaw was drawn, and, for now, Alfred can go back to reading the little book in which his mother first showed him the mysteries of the faith, and he can give laws. He maintains and expands military preparedness, and welcomes embassies from foreign lands. His contemporary biographer Asser asserts that Alfred divided his wealth in half, one-half going to the Church, and the other to secular needs; he gave a third of the fund set aside for secular use to foreign visitors. He sent alms to Ireland, several times to Rome, and also to Christians in India.

Some of his advisers urge Alfred to conquer the Danes and make, as it were, an empire, even unto Hadrian’s Wall. Alfred’s reply is an implied rebuke by Chesterton to the Imperialists of his own day. Alfred declares that he will fight only defensive wars, not wars of conquest. A wise man feels too humble for life, so he does not try to take possession of it, but a fool is proud, and life seems too small a thing for him. Alfred has enough labour to occupy him in ruling Wessex; ruling an empire would only bleed his strength. In his humility he again declares himself a “common king,” not wise enough to rule even so small a kingdom as Wessex.

Symbolically the scouring of the White Horse is Alfred’s rebuilding of English civilisation. Tradition is “a straight road and a steady light.” Even as his lords notice that Alfred is greying, an alarm is sounded: The Danes are come again! (Danes invaded Kent in 892). The lords lament—shall we never be rid of them? Wise Alfred points to the Horse and shows them that it needs to be plucked in every generation. Terror and theft, treason and shame, will grow silent and patient as weeds unless they be uprooted. Also, over our own Christian souls we shall see flying the proud banners of

heresies. "And though skies alter and empires melt, / This word shall still be true: / If we would have the horse of old, / Scour ye the horse anew." For once Alfred defeated the Danes, and thought he had achieved final victory, but now he knows that if "ye scour not well, / Red rust shall grow on God's great bell / And grass in the streets of God."

Now Alfred's speech turns visionary. Although he consecrates his land to Our Lady, he knows that "weeds will grow in it / Faster than men can burn." In centuries to come, "the heathen shall return." These modern barbarians shall not be warriors but writers, spreading in ink the falsehoods that plague us yet today. With false ideas they will impose a false order on the world, making the sun to be only a tiny star among "billions and billions," and the earth an insignificant pea in the forest of galaxies. In *Orthodoxy* Chesterton denounces the evil influence of Herbert Spencer on H. G. Wells, who set down the *theory* of Natural Selection as a *fact* of modern science. And in our day the Holy Father himself has declared it "more than a theory." Herbert Spencer "popularized this contemptible notion that the size of the solar system ought to over-awe the spiritual dogma of man," Chesterton wrote.

"By this sign you shall know them," prophesies Alfred. That men shall forget who their ancestors were. That all men shall be bound in economic slavery to a "blind idiot," the machine whose heart is Nothing. That men will no longer believe in the fact of sin, and will deny the necessity of baptism by denying the reality of sin itself. The nihilism of Friedrich Nietszche, who taught that the will to power is the only thing, will make our brains go soft (Nietzsche died an imbecile). Freaks and syphilitic idiots, like those Henrik Ibsen depicted in his play *Ghosts*, will fascinate us; and we will trace in our ancestors the curses that have come upon generations who denied what sin was. That everywhere men will speak of "keeping up with the times," and "making things relevant to a contemporary audience." And we can add some signs of our own times as well.

How the Cross shall conquer the modern barbarians Alfred's vision does not say. But Alfred rides out to war again, riding a grey horse to London, where the Danes have broken the treaty. Alfred takes London, finally, but meanwhile the creeping velvet moss and weeds are taking the White Horse. Chesterton here ends the epic abruptly—"abrupt and absolute as an epic ends," he wrote.

The Scouring of the White Horse would appear to be J. R. R. Tolkien's inspiration for the episode called the scouring of the Shire in *The Return of the King*. Tolkien in his youth greatly admired Chesterton's epic poem, and the parallels between the two works are apparent. As with the horse, so with the Shire: both must be vigilantly scoured if civilisation is to survive.

Photo 5: Portrait of King Alfred, 1661 ("Alfredus Fundator" or Alfred the Founder)