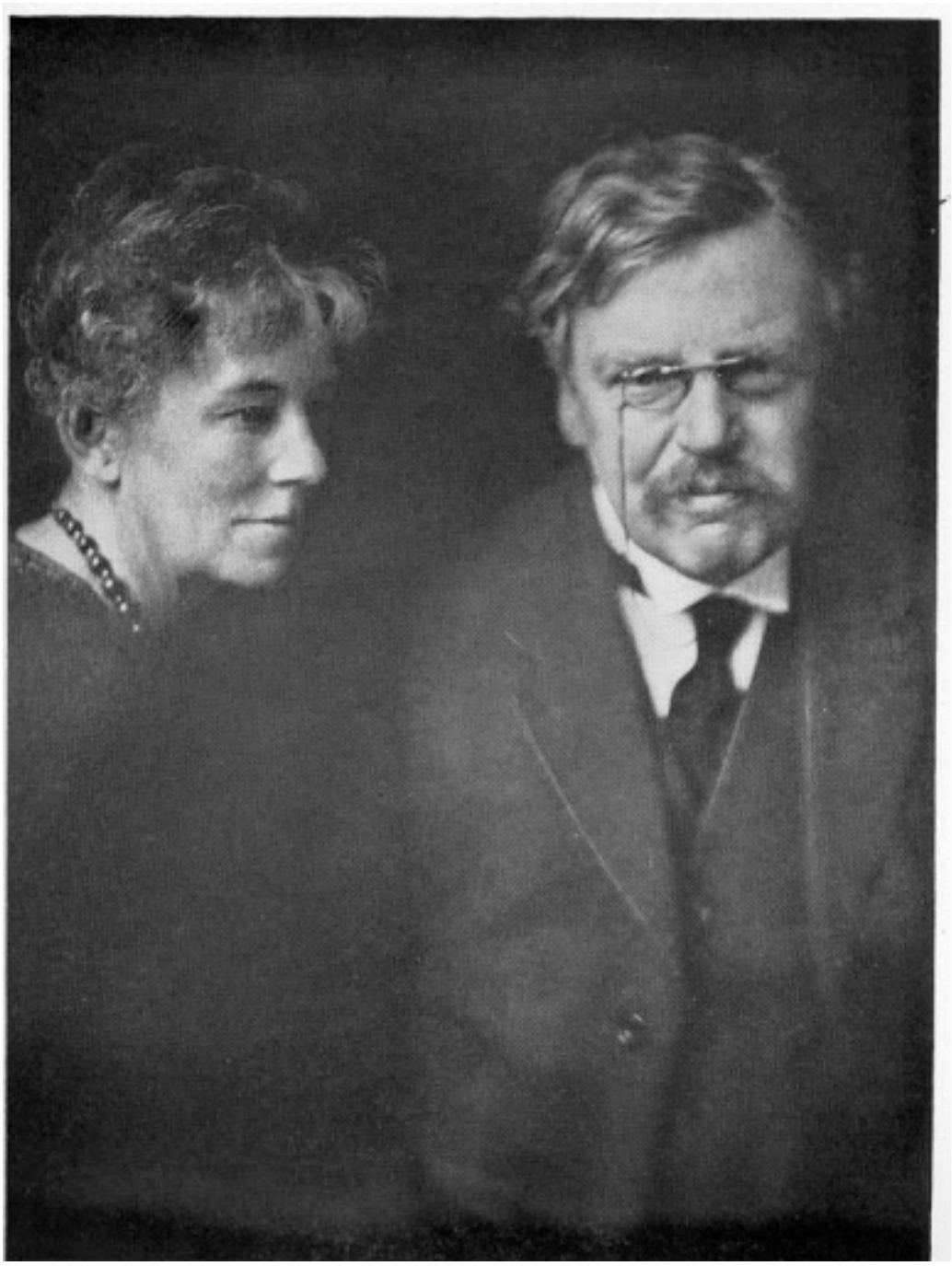
# Chesterton and Woman: Romance and Reality

2021 Australian Chesterton Conference Papers



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# Introduction

*Karl Schmude*

At a time of deepening cultural confusion over sex and gender and relationships between men and women, the 2021 conference of the Australian Chesterton Society – the 15th such gathering in the Society's history - addressed the theme of "Chesterton and Woman – Romance and Reality".

The event itself was disrupted by the COVID-19 restrictions. It was originally to be held in October 2020 at Campion College in Sydney, and was postponed to October 2021. Border closures and state-wide lockdowns prevented its being held on either occasion. Rather than postpone it a further time, the Society decided to replace it in two ways - with a publication of the papers that would have been delivered, and a set of video recordings by the speakers that would be made available on the Australian Chesterton website (http://chestertonaustralia.com/).

The conference considered various aspects of womanhood in the light of Chesterton's clarifying insights. Five papers were prepared by a range of invited presenters, the first three of whom are graduates of Campion College:

- **Siobhan Reeves**, who has experience in international relations and has served in various capacities for the Australian Government, addressed the topic of chivalry;

- **Angela Schumann**, who is completing a PhD in literature at Monash University, provided a study of Shakespeare's heroines; and

- **Frances Cantrall** reported on the Culture Project, a young people's movement which she founded in 2015 to offer senior high school students the messages of human dignity and sexual integrity as they begin to form serious relationships.

- **Stephen McInerney**, Senior Lecturer in Literature at Campion College, explored Sigrid Undset's award-winning novel, *Kristin Lavransdatter.*

- **Karl Schmude**, who reflected on 'The Fatherhood of Chesterton'.

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Membership of the Australian Chesterton Society is available for A$30.00 per annum. It includes a subscription to the Society's quarterly newsletter, *The Defendant,* and can be arranged by contacting the Society's Secretary/Treasurer, Mr Gary Furnell (details above).

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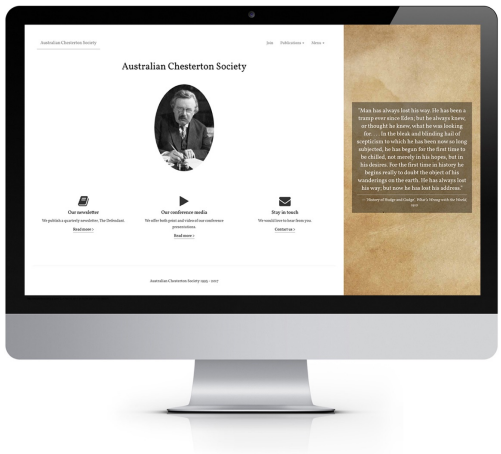
# Australian Chesterton Society Website

The conference papers were video-recorded and will be available on YouTube as well as on the Australian Chesterton website (http://chestertonaustralia.com/past-conferences), where the papers of previous conferences are also available, both in video and text form.

Website designed by Martin Schmude.



# Chesterton and Franciscan Chivalry

*Siobhan Reeves*

**C**hesterton was a deep admirer of St Francis of Assisi, and also greatly attracted to the ideal of chivalry, with commentary on chivalry featuring in his biographies, histories and travelogues.

This paper considers St Francis' recasting of medieval chivalry for a greater purpose, and how Chesterton may have resonated with this interpretation of Francis' vocation, particularly as set out in Fr. Mark Elvins' book, *Gospel Chivalry: Franciscan Romanticism*. Of course, one cannot discuss chivalry without discussing the role of women within it, and one cannot discuss St Francis without discussing the role of Lady Poverty. Considering these aspects of St Francis' spirituality combined with Chesterton's account of St Francis' life provides an alternative to a caricatured view of women often associated with Chesterton. More broadly, this analysis speaks to a richer understanding of the relationship between chivalry and Franciscan spirituality which can illuminate all aspects of Christian faith.

Briefly, St Francis of Assisi (b. 1181/1182, d. 1226) was the founder of the Franciscan orders of the Friars Minor, the Order of St Clare and a lay Third Order. St Francis was renowned for his evangelical poverty and his devotion to Christ, God and Man. In his youth he was attracted to glory on the battlefield, and was taken prisoner during a war between Assisi and Perugia in 1202. After his release and a period of illness he sought to join the papal forces against the Emperor Frederick II in 1205. On his journey to Apulia he experienced a vision that changed the course of his life – he renounced his wealth, embraced poverty and dedicated himself to rebuilding Christ's Church, famously physically repairing a number of churches and chapels, but more importantly spiritually taking to heart Christ's direction to the Apostles to spread the news of salvation.

St Francis particularly served the poor and the outcast, including communities of people afflicted by leprosy at the time. A community of like-minded men formed around him, and his Franciscan rule of life was approved by Pope Innocent III in 1210. St Francis' adventurous spirit had not waned: he experienced being shipwrecked in an attempt to reach the Holy Land to preach to the Muslims in 1212, and in 1219 he travelled to Egypt to preach to the Sultan al-Kamil whose city of Damietta was under siege by the Crusaders. According to some sources the Sultan gave St Francis permission to travel to and preach in the Holy Land, accounting for the role Franciscans have played in Jerusalem from the 13th century to the present day. However, the majority of St Francis' life was spent in ministry in Italy. In 1224 he received the stigmata, the five wounds of Christ, which he kept hidden. St Francis died in 1226, and despite spending the last years of his life in constant pain and near-blindness, he is understood to have died singing the Psalms.

A superficial reading of St Francis' life can draw easy comparisons with chivalric ideals - for example, his desire to serve on the battlefield and to travel and preach in the Holy Land. However, chivalry was an all-encompassing set of ideals and disciplines that was intended to guide men in medieval society in times of both war and peace. Chivalry was inextricably

bound with medieval Christianity: a true knight defended the Church, was loyal to the teachings of the Church and lived the Christian virtues. The 14th century *Book of Chivalry* by a French knight Geoffroi de Charny notes that these virtues include the defence and honour of women, the protection of the helpless, the pursuit of wisdom, the cultivation of courtesy, the practice of mercy, the attainment of holy piety and the rejection of materialism. While we will return to a more detailed examination of chivalric virtues in St Francis' life, it is useful to bear these in mind in considering Chesterton's account.

As with many of Chesterton's biographies, his *St Francis of Assisi* tells the reader just as much about Chesterton's character as it does of St Francis', as Chesterton is more concerned with St Francis' interior life than mere biographical details. It is worth noting that *St Francis of* Assisi was the first book written after Chesterton's reception into the Catholic Church, and that he took Francis as his confirmation name. Chesterton's admiration for St Francis is evident on every page of this short but powerful account. Chesterton makes the association between St Francis and chivalry upfront: he notes that as a young man St Francis was eager for the superficial trappings of chivalry: "He delighted in all the exercises of chivalry; and was evidently an accomplished cavalier and fighting man by the tests of the camp. He would doubtless at any time have preferred a Christian sort of chivalry; but it seems clear that he was also in a mood which thirsted for glory". However, Chesterton details at length how St Francis embodied so much more than a repurposing of military fervour for religious fervour . Chesterton expounds on St Francis' character, "(his) gaiety, romantic imagination, spiritual courtesy and camaraderie", and details St Francis as a man, a servant, a lover, and a romantic mystic.

In particular Chesterton notes St Francis' universal love for his fellow man, irrespective of status: "He was a Lover. He was a lover of God and he was really and truly a lover of men". Chesterton also details St Francis' emphasis on honour and service, which combined make up the medieval understanding of courtesy as an essential virtue. For St Francis no task was too lowly and no person unworthy of his attention as a fellow brother or sister in Christ. As Chesterton comments, St Francis found "the secret of life in being a servant". In Chesterton's account of his travels in the Holy Land, *The New Jersualem*, he comments, as part of a discourse on chivalry and differing ideals around reverence in Christian and Islamic societies: "Wherever there is chivalry there is courtesy; and wherever there is courtesy there is comedy". This observation is also made, less directly, in *St Francis of Assisi* – in addition to detailing St Francis' qualities as servant of all, Chesterton also expands on St Francis as a 'jongleir de Dieu'. This is referencing the medieval legend of a juggler wondering how to best serve God, and is brought to the understanding that entertaining the Christ-Child with his tricks is genuine service and devotion. St Francis and a number of his followers were renowned for their exuberance and joy in proclaiming the Gospel, spontaneously bursting into song and other antics. It is not surprising that this particular characteristic of St Francis would be particularly appealing to Chesterton, and indeed joy ranked equal to valour in medieval understandings of chivalry. Chesterton notes St Francis' description of himself as a troubadour (travelling musicians of the time), and that he was "a Troubadour of a newer and nobler romance… (he was) not using a mere metaphor". This nobler romance can be articulated in terms of a new knighthood, a truer chivalry that is rooted in the Gospel.

To expand on this, I highly recommend *Gospel Chivalry: Franciscan Romanticism*, by a Franciscan priest, Fr. Mark Turnham Elvins O. F. M. Cap (b. 1939, d. 2014). He was a convert to Catholicism, ordained a priest in 1973 and involved in the practice of chivalry for most of his life: he was an Ecclesiastical Knight of Grace of the Sacred Military Constantinian Order of Saint George and a chaplain of Magistral Grace of the Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of Saint John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. *Gospel Chivalry: Franciscan Romanticism* was published in 2006, the 800th anniversary of St Francis' vocation, and is a treatise explicitly on "Francis the knight" – a moniker that would have no doubt appealed to Chesterton.

Fr Elvins details how over St Francis' life, the failure of chivalry to be a "civilizing influence on the military ambitions of the aristocracy with the culture of a Christian society" was becoming apparent. At its worse, chivalry became a "deluded romanticism", divorced from piety and courtesy in any real sense, and supported by an underclass of the poor.[1] However, rather than cast aside completely a noble ideal corrupted, Francis "understood his following of Christ as chivalric service…. (he) found his new and spiritual knighthood, a chivalry suffused with the Gospel to replace the aristocratic propaganda". Chivalry had attracted Francis in his youth as Chesterton notes, but Francis repurposed the values of a secular knighthood as Fr Elvins proposes in the below table:

| **The status of worldly knighthood was indicated by:** | **For Francis, knights of Christ had no status, indicated by:** |
|---|---|
| Dress | Dress of a vagabond |
| Largesse | Mendicancy (living solely on alms) |
| Wealth | Identified with the poor |
| Leisure | Labour with hands |
| Power | Subject to all |
| Title | Lesser brother |
| Military prowess | Peacemaker |

Chesterton described at length St Francis' romantic nature, and Fr Elvins similarly expands on this point: "Through his vision the Gospel became a romance, which secular chivalry could only imperfectly achieve. Only heavenly chivalry could enter into the divine adventure of the world's redemption". Through St Francis' preaching on salvation, he encouraged a faith alive with service and devotion.

Fr Elvin's scholarship assists with a nuanced understanding of the role of women in St Francis' 'spiritual knighthood'. An essential part of chivalry was the defence and courtship of women, and Fr Elvin argues that "the place of women in chivalry was to inspire love". St Francis had a particular Marian devotion and also a sincere allegorical love for Lady Poverty,

[1] Note: Fr Elvins does discuss exceptions to the failures of chivalry - for example, in the early years of the Brethren of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem, which would become known as the Knights of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta. The administrator of the Hospital at the outset of the 12th century, one Gerard, founded a new order of Hospitallers to care for the sick: the maxim of the Order was to uphold 'the honour of God, courtesy to all and service to Christ in the sick and the poor'. St Francis is not the only medieval example of the spiritualization of knighthood with lasting impact.

which Chesterton also notes. Shortly after St Francis' death, writings from his companions described St Francis as a suitor of Lady Poverty, the representation of a complete renunciation of worldly wealth to the utter dejection and poverty at the foot of the Cross. St Francis' devotion to Lady Poverty speaks to a self-denying love aligned with chivalric notions of unrequited love: Fr Elvins described this love as "the love which defers and submits, the love which endures and suffers joyfully... that which unites with the Son of God, who out of love suffered for sinful humanity". Lady Poverty was the 'lady' of St Francis' knightly aspirations. Thomas of Celano, St Francis' first biographer, wrote of St Francis' allegorical devotion for Lady Poverty in these terms: "After he had become a lover of her beauty, he not only left his father and mother, but even put aside all things, that he might cling to her more closely as his spouse and that they might be two in one spirit". This mystical woman inspired a love that St Francis could meaningfully live out through his service to Christ and the Church.

Fr Elvins also notes that throughout the 12th century there was an increase in devotion to Our Lady, partly as a reaction to the slaughter that accompanied the Crusades: "Mary, as the perfect Spouse, became not only the antidote to the brutal trade of war but also a healthy influence on the profligacy of courtly love". The romantic quest in secular chivalry was easily distorted into naïve flirtations or adulterous relationships. Our Lady's acceptance of God's will and her service to Elizabeth, the Holy Family and Christ's disciples align with the ideal woman in medieval society: courteous and suffering without complaint. Fr Elvins notes that "Love in this sense is the courtesy of faith… Our Lady would thus seem to have provided a connection between religious devotion and chivalry in the idealization of women". St Francis had a deep Marian devotion, and ardent praise to Our Lady is included in prayers attributed to St Francis. Chesterton himself wrote poetry dedicated to Our Lady, from his youth until his death. It is telling that in Chesterton's biography of St Francis he writes of Our Lady only in relation to his exposition of St Francis as a jongleur de Dieu, referring to the specific legend of the Tumbler of Our Lady – in Chesterton's account of St Francis' spirituality, devotion to Our Lady and spiritual joy are coupled together.

Fr Elvins also discusses St Francis as a jongleur de Dieu, and notes an affinity with the tradition of the holy fool – the renunciation of worldly wisdom for an unknown eternal kingdom. The tradition of the holy fool largely flourished in the Christian East after the Great Schism of 1054, and still today St Francis is venerated in that tradition as a holy fool; a figure who upended worldly notions of status and decorum for the folly of Christ crucified.

All parts of St Francis' spirituality come back to an ardent love for the Christ who made the ultimate sacrifice for our salvation. Fr Elvins writes that "this reckless self-sacrificing love (of Christ) Francis saw as the perfect antidote to the vainglorious extravagance of secular chivalry." Indeed, it can be argued that St Francis' love was reckless in return, but his exuberant devotion brings to mind Chesterton's oft-quoted direction: "Let your religion be less of a theory and more of a love affair". St Francis' love affair with Lady Poverty and with Christ was a truer romance and a calling to a greater service, building on the romantic ideals of his time. As Fr Elvins notes, "The Gospel in Francis' eyes became a chivalrous adventure in which love, joy and service, purified by faith, became the artisans of a new code of Christian living. In this the life of Christ became the perfect model of knighthood and the source of Gospel chivalry."

In conclusion then, let us call out the sublime paradox that could not but appeal to Chesterton, the prince of paradox.

The life of St Francis is witness to the fact that a true knight of Christ desires not material wealth but poverty, not the embrace of a lover but the embrace of a leper, not the love of a woman but the love of Lady Poverty, not the wounds of the battlefield but the wounds of Christ, and not the temporary glory of an earthly kingdom but the eternal beauty of a heavenly realm. And in terms so apt given the title of this conference, Fr Elvins comments, "in transforming worldly chivalry into a spiritual code, he anticipated **the life of heaven in which romance and allegory become a reality**. The medieval dream thus fades like a trick of the light and symbol gives way to the ultimate truth".

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**Siobhan Reeves** graduated from Campion College with a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts in 2011, and from University of Melbourne with a Masters in International Relations in 2014. Siobhan has spent time working in international healthcare development, including in Timor-Leste for a local healthcare NGO, and has served in various roles for the Australian Government at the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and the National Indigenous Australians Agency. Recently Siobhan returned to the community sector, working in alcohol and other drugs policy in Canberra.

# "A servant of God – a stubborn, defiant maid" – Sigrid Undset's *Kristin Lavransdatter*

*Stephen McInerney*

### *Loss and Renunciation*

**G.K.** Chesterton reflected on love, sex and marriage with his unique mixture of realism and idealism. "The first two facts which a healthy boy or girl feels about sex are these: first that it is beautiful and then that it is dangerous." He said that "marriage is a duel to the death which no man of honour should decline" and described it elsewhere as a "perpetual crisis". Sigrid Undset's trilogy *Kristin Lavransdatter* demonstrates the truth of all three statements.

Kristin is one of the great heroines in the history of the novel, deserving of a place alongside Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary as a woman who defied – and was punished for defying – social conventions in the name of passionate love. Unlike Anna and Emma, however, Kristen's end is not tragic – instead, in accordance with her author's Christian vision, she is redeemed by finally and decisively embracing the cross of Christ, inverting the fate of the fallen woman so familiar to us in the nineteenth-century novel, without any sacrifice of the earthy realism that provides the backdrop to such narratives.

Written in the third decade of the twentieth century, the *Kristen Lavransdatter* trilogy is a story of inversions in other ways. It inverts the expectations we have for medieval romance literature by consistently highlighting the reality of sin and the toughness and dangers of medieval culture caught between heathenism and Christianity. At the end of the first novel of the trilogy, the wilful Kristin gets her man, despite her father's reluctance, but the expected joy of her wedding is overshadowed by her anxiety at the suffering she has caused her parents, by her anger at Erlend for getting her pregnant but remaining blissfully unaware of it, and later by the ambiguous relocation to Husaby – Erlend's estate – where Kristin feels and is treated as an outsider, as she struggles to take charge of an estate in disrepair.

*Kristin Lavransdatter* also inverts our age's secular expectations, for Kristin does not find lasting happiness in any worldly or material sense, despite outwardly gaining a great deal in Husaby and being blessed with many healthy sons. Instead, she increasingly realises – as we move through the second and third volumes of the trilogy – through a series of hard lessons and repeated backsliding, that in this world we have no lasting abode. Her husband is a disappointment to her, her sons grow distant from her as they grow more and more in their father's image, her father – the source of much of her sense of stability in the world – dies, followed soon by her mother, and finally, through Erlend's imprudence and adultery, Kristin loses everything that she and her husband had worked to build. The decline of Jorundgaard, the estate on which she was raised and which her parents had devoted their lives to building, heightens the sense of loss and separation.

Her husband, too, in a final humiliation for Kristin, abandons her, leading to suspicion that her last born child is not his. Consequently, Kristin is accused of adultery, which suggests that she has never been able to overcome the suspicion of her character that began, in the first novel, with her innocent dalliance with her young friend Arne, her near-rape by the cleric Bentein, her rejection of her betrothed, Simon, and her clandestine relationship with Erlend. As rumours spread, she loses the respect of her old neighbours at Jorundgaard and almost loses her good standing in the Church, thus coming close to the fate of her mentor, the excommunicated Fru Aashild, who is popularly believed to be a witch.

Kristin also falls out with her sister, Ramborg, who has gone on to marry the man Kristen rejected, Simon. Ramborg envies Kristin's beauty and attractiveness to men and, above all, Simon's persistent love for Kristin, which overshadows – in Ramborg's eyes – the love he has for her. Kristin, as such, more or less loses everything that is important to her – all, that is, except God.

I want to consider this idea of loss and renunciation in the trilogy generally, in order to illuminate the important choices Kristin makes at three crucial stages: (i) marrying Erlend, (ii) curing Simon's son, and (iii) saving the life of the orphan at the end of the work. These three episodes relate to one another, in that on each occasion Kristin is presented with the choice to follow Christ or to follow sin. Loss and renunciation help her, in the final example, to choose Christ once and for all. This final choice exorcises the demons of the old pagan dispensation that divide the hearts, to varying degrees, of each of the main characters in the trilogy, especially Erlend.

## Husaby

One of the great ironies in Kristin's life is that, having gone through so much to get Erlend, the marriage is consistently dogged by misunderstanding. Drawn together by sexual passion, Kristin and Erlend in the cold light of day are divided, as passion gives way to bitterness. It is appropriate therefore that the second volume of the trilogy, *The Wife*, should begin not with the fervour of passionate romance, nor even the intrigue and passion of outright evil (such as we see dramatic death of Erlend's mistress, Eline, in *The Wreath)*, but with something utterly domestic, ordinary and awful – Kristin's vomiting from seasickness and morning sickness. Erlend wants Kristin to restore honour to his name and estate, yet the presence of a child "under her belt" months too soon, makes this impossible. The home is lice ridden, the horses and fields neglected, the supplies low, and the manners and customs generally at variance with those Kristin is used to at Jorundgaard. Thus begins the repeated comparison between Erlend's Husaby and Lavrans' Jorundgaard and, therefore, between Erlend and Lavrans.

The tension between the couple comes to a head when, fed-up with hearing her father's customs mocked by Erlend, the pregnant Kristen flees to the forest. When she returns, Erlend strikes her. Getting into bed later that same night, Erlend cuts his hand on a knife. This symbolically links this moment with Kristin's encounter with the elf-maiden at the start of *The Wreath*, where her hands are bloodied after rushing up the craggy slope. It is worth pausing for a moment over that earlier episode, since the symbolic logic of the entire trilogy turns on it.

# The Elf-Maiden

*Kristen heard a stream trickling and gurgling somewhere nearby. She walked toward the sound until she found it, and then she lay down on a slab of rock and washed her sweaty, mosquito-bitten face and hands. Beneath the rock slab the water stood motionless in a deep black pool; on the other side a sheer rock rose up behind several slender birch trees and willow thickets. It made the finest mirror, and Kristen leaned over and looked at herself in the water. She wanted to see if what Isrid had said was true, that she resembled her father.*

*She smiled and nodded and bent forward until her hair met the blond hair framing the round young face with the big eyes that she saw in the water. … Then Kristen picked some blossoms and carefully bound them together with blades of grass until she had the loveliest, pinkest, and most tightly woven wreath. The child pressed it down on her hair and ran over to the pool to see how she looked, now that she was adorned like a grown-up maiden about to go to a dance.*

*She bent over the water and saw her own dark image rise up from the depths and become clearer as it came closer. Then she saw in the mirror of the stream that someone was standing among the birches on the other side and leaning toward her.*

*Abruptly she straightened up into a kneeling position and looked across the water. At first she thought she saw only the rock face and the trees clustered at its base. But suddenly she discerned a face among the leaves – there was a woman over there, with a pale face and flowing, flaxen hair. Her big light-grey eyes and her flaring, pale-pink nostrils reminded Kristen of Guldsvein's. She was wearing something shiny and leaf-green, and branches and twigs hid her figure up to her full breasts, which were covered with broches and gleaming necklaces.*

*Kristen stared at the vision. Then the women raised her hand and showed her a wreath of golden flowers and beckoned to her with it.*

*Behind her, Kristen heard Guldsvein whinny loudly with fear. She turned her head. The stallion reared up, gave a resounding shriek, and then whirled around and set off up the hillside, making the ground thunder. The other horses followed. They rushed straight up the scree, so that rocks plummeted down with a crash, and branches and roots snapped and cracked.*

*Then Kristen screamed as loud as she could. "Father!" she shrieked. "Father!" She sprang to her feet and ran up the slope after the horses, not daring to look back over her shoulder. She clambered up the scree, tripped on the hem of her dress, and slid down, then climbed up again, scrabbling onward with bleeding hands… [H]er father came bounding toward ger, calling her name, and Kristen sank down, realizing that now she was saved.*

*"Sancta Maria!" Lavrans knelt down next to his daughter and pulled her to him. His face was pale and there was a strange look to his mouth that frightened Kristen even more; not until she saw his face did she realize the extent of her peril.*

*"It was a woman. She beckoned to me with a wreath of gold – I think it was a dwarf maiden, Father."*

*"Jesus Christus", said Lavrans softly, making the sign of the cross over the child and himself…He pulled out the golden chain with the reliquary cross from inside his shirt and hung it around Kristen's next, placing it against her own skin.*

The encounter with the elf maiden introduces the reader to the tension between Christianity and paganism (and superstition), which is a major theme of the trilogy. There is no question within the world of the novel that we are supposed to take this event as real – elf-maidens and other spirits are as much a part of the real world as water, bread, wine, wood and the sacraments of the Church, and just as mysterious. This is still very much a picture of the world prior to its modern disenchantment, as Charles Taylor has described it. Such realism is the ground for, rather than opposed to, the symbolic or allegorical meaning of the event, and points to the first breach in Kristin's innocence, as she emerges with a torn dress and bleeding hands.

Related to this, Kristin leans over the water to admire her own reflection and is thus clearly associated with Narcissus who was drowned on account of his self-love. Kristin is "kneeling" over the water when the elf-maiden appears, suggesting that the pagan world offers an alternative for worship to the God of Christianity. The vision that Kristin has – the elf-maiden shows her a wreath of golden flowers – is suggestive of marriage, but here the elf-maiden is offering an eternal marriage, to the 'Mountain King', and an eternal escape into the woods. After she meets Erlend (who significantly saves her from danger in the woods), he actualises in some ways the myth of the Mountain King, but reality soon enough intervenes to remove Kristin from her reverie.

## Erlend

The true nature of Erlend's character gradually dawns on Kristin as the trilogy progresses. On the one hand, Erlend emerges more and more as someone "above" other men – in manliness, courage, adventurousness. On the other hand, he is morally less than the more prosaic men in Kristin's life, and in this sense is "beneath" Lavrans and, to a certain extent, Simon. In addition to his bad habits – Kristin is appalled by his manners as table, for example – he is thoroughly immature. Instead of being happy at Kristin's pregnancy, he is angry that his plans to parade her on his estate (before Lavrans and his kin) are disrupted. To make matters worse for Kristin, Erlend never seems to learn from his failings. He repeatedly makes the same mistakes and is constantly unaware of the effect of his actions on others (Simon notes that Erlend had such a "rare talent for forgetting"). Nor does he show any awareness of the inconsistencies in his own code. Where Kristin sins through brooding too much on Erlend's sins (neither forgiving nor forgetting his failings), he by contrast is too quick to forget and too quick to forgive himself. He blames her for his adultery with Fru Sunniva and insults Kristin by describing her as a "holy witch" – an accusation which hurts all the more because it contains an element of truth.

No episode more clearly reveals the ambiguities and inconsistencies of Erlend's character than his being discovered as a traitor to the authority of King Magnus. Erlend's knightly qualities – his courage, loyalty, grace under pressure – are all revealed in abundance. So it is

that when he is sentenced to death, he "listened to his sentence with a steadfast, calm expression, and he had greeted the gentlemen of the royal retinue in just as courteous, open, and splendid a manner when he was led out as when he had been escorted in. He was calm and cheerful…". But these noble qualities are coupled with imprudence and unreliability: he was only caught in his treachery as result of his adulterous affair, stupidly leaving the secret letters of the conspiracy in the presence of his mistress, who reveals them to Erlend's enemies. Getting involved in the conspiracy in the first place was a wild and imprudent act, given his familial situation, with a wife and children dependent on him:

> *It was true that Erlend himself was to blame for the whole endeavor resulting in nothing more than misfortune for him and the good man who had been exposed by his foolish philandering.*

> *'The man who took such great plans onto his shoulders – and no one knows how important they might have been to the welfare of all of us here in Norway, and to our descendants for many years to come – he set them all aside, along with his breeches, on the bed of a wanton woman.'*

Erlend takes great pride in having never betrayed a man involved in the conspiracy, and in a revealing and ironic moment he declares to Simon: "I have never betrayed anyone who has put their trust in me". As Undset writes, pointedly: "it was obvious that he truly believed this about himself". But, of course, he *has* betrayed the person who above all others placed her trust in him – Kristin.

There is a sense of inevitability about Erlend's demise. His spirit of adventure takes him away from home on numerous occasions, in his boat, and finally he seeks the freedom of the distant retreat in Haugen. Even there, he cannot comprehend why Kristin will not join him, leaving their children behind. He yearns, clearly, for a life without responsibilities and obligations, and it his stubborn pursuit of this idyll that leads, though indirectly, to the final tragedy in the marriage of Kristin and Erlend – the calumniation of Kristen by the priest and villagers, who speculate on why husband and wife are living apart. To defend her honour, Erlend is drawn out of the mountains back to Jorundgaard, is wounded in combat, and dies.

Fundamentally, the difference between Erlend and Kristin is the difference of self-awareness. Kristin suffers from her divisions – pulled in all directions, between the flesh and the spirit, between her parents and Erlend, between paganism and Christianity – whereas Erlend simply *is* and simply *does*. He suffers no agonies in his choices, only as a result of them, whereas Kristin is continually caught between two worlds. This leads us to a discussion of three significant choices and their consequences.

## Three decisions compared

Towards the end of *The Wife*, the second novel of the trilogy, after Erlend's affair and his treachery towards King Magnus have been exposed and he has been dragged to prison, Kristen reflects on the choice she made to marry Erlend:

> *She had chosen him herself. She had chosen him in an ecstasy of passion, and she had chosen him again each day during those difficult years back home at Jorundgaard – his impetuous passion in place of her father's love, which would not allow even the wind to toucher harshly. She had refused the destiny that her father*

*had wished for her when he wanted to put her into the arms of a man who would have safely led her onto the most secure paths, even bending down to remove every little pebble that she might tread upon. She has chosen to follow the other man, whom she knew travelled on dangerous paths. Monks and priests had pointed out remorse and repentance as the road home to peace, but she had chosen strife rather than give up her precious sin….Holy Olav, help me, so that I do not now prove unworthy of my father's love…. Once again Kristen spoke the words of a prayer to the Virgin into the red of the evening. Hail Mary, full of grace! I dare not ask you for more than one thing – I see that now. Save Erlend, save my husband's life!*

By refusing the destiny her father had set for her, Kristin seems to imperil her salvation, but this is an appearance only, not the reality. God always finds another way. The cross is precisely the point where our way and God's way intersect – seemingly opposed, running at right angles, the distinct paths nonetheless coincide in moments such as these, where Kristen is given the grace to accept the path that her father, Lavrans, and God – respecting her freedom – allowed her to travel. Lavrans had wanted Kristen to marry Simon; Kristen had thought about offering her life to God in the convent. She throws both possibilities away to marry Erlend, but she never stops suffering for her decision, even when making it. The suffering is part of the grace she has received, as it reminds her that she is always free to make the right choice.

The next such dilemma for Kristen presents itself when, in *The Cross,* she visits Simon, the man she had refused to marry and who is now married to her sister Ramborg. Simon and Ramborg's son, Andres, is gravely ill and about to die. Kristen cannot bear the thought that God will take Andres away, and so, to cure him, she decides to use the witchcraft she has learned from Fru Aashild:

*"You must arrange things so that you are alone in here when I come back." She spoke as if her throat and mouth were parched. "Sit with him, and when you see me enter, don't say a word. And never speak of this again – not to me or to anyone else. Not even to your priest."*

*Simon got to his feet and slowly walked over to her. He too had grown pale. "No, Kristin!" His voice was almost inaudible. "I don't dare… for you to do this thing…"*

*She put on her cloak, then took a linen cloth from the chest in the corner, folded it up, and hid it in her bodice.*

*"But I dare. You understand that no one must come near us afterward until I call; no one must come near to us or speak to us until he wakes up and speaks himself."*

*"What do you think your father would say of this?" he whispered in the same faint voice. "Kristin… don't do it."*

*"In the past I have done things that my father thought were wrong; back then it was merely to further my own desire. Andres is his flesh and blood too – my own flesh, Simon – my only sister's son."*

*Simon took in a heavy, trembling breath; he stood with his eyes downcast. "But if you don't want me to make this last attempt…"*

*He stood as before, with his head bowed, and did not reply. Then Kristen repeated her question, unaware that an odd little smile, almost scornful, had appeared on her*

*white lips. "Do you not want me to go?"…*
*She knew that if it had been one of her own children, she would not have dared make this last attempt. To turn away God's hand when He reached out for a living soul. It was clear she would be a different person [after this]…*

Kristen sins for seemingly selfless reasons, but her decision violates God's law, is a clear choice for the flesh over the spirit and is also partly motivated by her feelings of contempt for Simon. She wants to make him complicit in her decision and she does so because she wants him to feel the sting of sin the way she felt it when she rejected him for Erlend. Psychologically, Kristen wants to feel that the man she rejected all those years ago is not after all as good a man as Lavrans believed, that in fact he is no better than Erlend. As Undset writes, entering Kristen's thoughts: "Because you too, Simon Darre, acquiesced when the dearest thing you possessed on earth was at stake; you agreed to more than anyone can accept with full honor."

The final and most important choice that confronts Kristen occurs in the closing stages of the trilogy. By this time she is a widow living as a nun in a convent. Having entered the cloister, one has the sense that Kristen has finally arrived home, but the definitive moment of conversion is ahead of her. Plague is sweeping the land; rumours spread that people are returning to heathen practices, including child sacrifice to the goddess Hel. Finally, a child whose mother has caught plague is abducted by the villagers and readied for sacrifice. Kristin stands up: "We must go out there… We can't just sit here while Christian souls sell themselves to the Devil right on our doorstep." She liberates the child and confronts the villagers: "Go home and thank God you were saved before you committed an act you might never be able to atone for." Echoing the High Priest during the trial of Jesus, one of the men calls out: "Isn't it better to sacrifice one than for all of us to perish? The boy here, who belongs to no one –." To which Kristen responds: "He belongs to Christ. Better for all of us to perish than for us to harm one of his children." By saving the child and facing down the villagers and the lure of the heathen goddess, Kristen reverses the work of the demons she'd released when using the occult to save Andres. But this comes because she first identifies with the child's persecutors: "I am like *you*. I am not like the holy sisters. I am one of you." Challenged by the villagers to prove her virtue by recovering the dead body of the child's mother, Kristen goes to the stinking plague-ridden body and brings it back for Christian burial, thus fulfilling one of the corporal works of mercy. As a result, she catches the deadly disease and dies, without her ring, with a final thought, as the priest ministers to her:

*The gold ring was gone… On the brown, rough flesh it was quite clear – like a scar on thin white skin. She thought she could even make out two round circles from the rubies on either side and a tiny scratch, an M from the center of the ring where the holy symbol of the Virgin May had been etched in gold.*

*The last clear thought that took shape in her mind was that she was going to die before the mark had time to fade, and it made her happy. It seemed to her a mystery that she could not comprehend, but she was certain that God had held her firmly in a pact which had been made for her, without her knowing it, from a love that had been poured over her – and in spite of her wilfulness, in spite of her melancholy,*

*earthbound heart, some of that love had stayed inside her, had worked on her like the sun on the earth, had driven forth a crop that neither the fiercest fire of passion nor its stormiest anger could completely destroy. She had been a servant of God – a stubborn, defiant maid, most often an eye-servant in her prayers and unfaithful in her heart, indolent and neglectful, impatient towards admonishments, inconstant in her deeds. And yet He had held her firmly in His service, and under the glittering ring a mark had been secretly impressed upon her, showing that she was His servant, owned by the Lord and King who would now come, borne on the consecrated hands of the priest, to her release and salvation.*

The difficulty of arriving at this moment – through the narrow gate, as it were – is made clear from the sympathy the reader experiences earlier in the novel for Erlend's predicament in his final hour of life, when he refuses the ministrations of the priest who has calumniated Kristin and called her honour into question. According to Erlend's chivalric code, he would be betraying his wife's honour by agreeing to receive the last rites from Sira Solomund's hands. We certainly *feel* (as distinct from 'think') that Erlend is right to refuse the sacraments in these circumstances; however, the decision means Erlend is deprived of the last rites and a 'good death', since he is divided between the law of God and the law of man. By contrast, Kristin meets her death with a spirit of complete abandonment to God's law, but she does so not despite Erlend but with him, because of him, and *for* him. Her ring, now released from her finger, has indelibly marked her as a daughter of Mary. And the bride of Erlend has become a bride of Christ.

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# Can Romance be a Reality for Teenagers Today? The Challenges of Contemporary Culture

*Frances Cantrall*

While many contributors to this conference will be sharing great insights from perhaps a more intellectual and literary lens, it is my hope to share with you some lessons I've learnt from some young friends and my observations from encountering young people over the last seven years. Karl invited me to present at the GK Chesterton conference with a topic centering around the ways in which young teenagers - both boys and girls - are coping with the conditions of contemporary culture, in terms of their expectations and experiences, particularly in their desire to have serious and lasting relationships in the midst of sexual confusion and peer pressure.

When it comes to getting a gauge of how teenagers are coping and responding to the conditions of contemporary culture, our annual trip to "Schoolies'' does just that. Prior to Covid, every year I would spend a week at Surfers Paradise on the Gold Coast for an event known as "Schoolies". For anyone who is unfamiliar with this 'coming of age' ceremony for school leavers on the East Coast of Australia, it is an affair where thousands of freshly graduated Yr 12's go to party, which usually involves copious amounts of drugs, sex and alcohol.

We meet these future leaders, tradies, professionals and parents as they're sobering up on the beaches. We open with a question, 'What is love?' While the initial response is generally "Baby, don't hurt me," the call and response from the Haddaway song, what usually follows is a conversation on what love really is. Is it a mere feeling? What about sex? Is it a recreational activity or something that carries meaning? What is the difference between loving someone and using someone? Many open up about their own experiences when it comes to relationships.

I will forever remember two boys I met, back in 2015, from Plainsland, QLD. These boys were the last people on the beach I thought it would be a good idea to talk to. They were smoking, wearing death metal T-shirts and were decked out in satanic memorabilia. I asked them, "What is love?"

One of them laid back on his hands in the sand, squinting, and said, "Love is $H!T." When I gently prodded as to why he thought that, he responded, "Love is $h!t, everything the culture says about love is $h!T." I then asked what they were passionate about, "We're into death horror-rap-gore music." I had no idea what that genre of music was, so I asked for a demonstration. They proceeded to rap while simultaneously screaming lyrics about eating aborted babies. When they finished, they simply said to me "We're counter-cultural." "I'm

counter-cultural too," I said. He glanced at me with a suspicious look, as if to say, 'You, really?'

"I've been getting death threats since I was fourteen," I assured him. He eased back again, and said, "Dope."

What followed was several hours of questions on what love is, when does life begin, and friends' addictions to child pornography. These young men opened up to me about their lives, about losing a friend to a drug overdose at the age of fourteen and losing a father to suicide at the age of two.

Then one of them looked at me, with his brown eyes, and explained, "All we have in life is to be happy, so we're going to be as happy as we can be and then end it." Before I could speak a word, he clarified, "We have a pact, we're going to do it together." In a sense, I can understand the logic of what they said, but my heart broke for my two new friends. "What if there's more?" I asked. "What if there's more in this life than just being happy?"

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**"Meaninglessness does not come from being weary of pain.**
**Meaninglessness comes from being weary of pleasure." GK Chesterton**

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These boys were sharing with me the logical conclusion of their worldview that has, in part, been shaped by contemporary culture. If they believe that all we are is mere matter, which exists as a result of a chance cosmic accident - if they have tasted the fruit of the sexual revolution, that sex is just a pleasurable, recreational activity - then why would they hope that there could be more?

While I acknowledge that there are a cocktail of beliefs, philosophies and events that have shaped our current culture - Descartes, Hume and the sexual revolution, just to name a handful - I will not be focusing on this during our short time together. I will leave that to someone more learned and articulate than I. Rather, my hope is to share with you the impact the culture has on young people and an avenue to remedy the moral ills that are its symptoms. Many of us young folk have forgotten who we are and for what we were created.

There has been a significant shift in our cultural norms around life, love and identity. With the legalisation of abortion up to birth and the sacredness of marriage replaced with a hashtag, rather than aligning our sexuality to the infinite, we have an inifinte number of 'sexualities' and biological males permitted to attend all girl schools.

In the vast majority of the classrooms I encounter, I see the faces of the statistics on youth exposure to pornography, sexual assault, depression, anxiety and self-harm. These two young lads are not alone in coming to a negative and cynical conclusion after experimenting with what the culture offers.

Earlier this year, you may have seen or heard about Chanel Contos' exposure of the rape culture that is prevalent in our Australian schools. Thousands of women and some men wrote about their gut-wrenching experience of being used for another's pleasure. It highlighted the discrepancy that, although we've been told that sex isn't a big deal and just a bit of fun, our experience screams otherwise.

In a culture that has experienced the sexual revolution, in which we've glorified sexual freedom by seperating the pleasure from procreation, normalised a hookup culture and embraced pornography as the sex ed for a generation, this petition highlighted the devastating effect of a culture that views humans as objects for pleasure.

If the claims of the sexual revolution are true, that sex is merely a pleasurable recreational activity, then why are so many people suffering from being pressured into a fun activity? Why do these stories bring us to tears? Students themselves are beginning to see that there must be more to the story if we're going to have lasting and healthy relationships.

This drama of trying what the culture promises will bring us happiness and the emptiness we ACTUALLY experience in its wake is what we see in a microcosm at Schoolies. At the start of the week, spirits are high as everyone is excited to have what they've been sold as " the best week of your life". About half way into the week, there's a shift in the mood of those we speak to on the beaches. These eighteen year olds start wanting more than what they've had.

"I don't want to go to the club again."

"I don't want another random hook up."

"I don't want to wake up in bed with a stranger."

The suffering from being used takes longer to recover from than a hangover. I remember one girl that, as we were talking about our worth as women and the meaning of the body, just began to cry, and I am haunted by the phrase she kept repeating, "I wish I met you before last night …. I wish I met you before last night."

She went on to share with me her first experience of a one-night stand and the ache of her heart. To paraphrase St John Paul II's personalistic norm, she was made to be loved and never to be used.

It's pretty confusing out there right now for most teenagers. While some have witnessed healthy relationships, others are chasing the cycle of use that the culture assures us will bring us happiness. Others yet still have experienced what the culture has to offer and are left jaded, negative and cynical. What is true for all young people, regardless of where they may be on the above scale, is that they were created to love and be loved and they are made for more than what the culture is offering them. Contrary to the predominant worldview, if our body reveals meaning, if sex is more than recreation and if love is more than use, then these statements have enormous ramifications not just on those two young blokes from

QLD, but for all our young people.

We were speaking in a public school in regional NSW, due to the political climate around marriage we were strictly instructed to not mention marriage to the students. We didn't mention marriage, instead we spoke to the girls about their worth and dignity. We were shocked to discover the impact these profound truths had on one particular Yr 8 girl who wrote on her feedback form, "Now I know my life is worth living."

During one of our reflections days at a private school in Sydney at lunchtime, I was having quite a philosophical conversation about the human person and diving into topics of pornography and transgenderism with a Yr 11 male student. The bell rang, summoning us to the last session. He quickly asked his final question, "Thank you for coming in today. Thank you for coming here and sharing this with us, but where were you when I was in Yr 7?"

That boy gave me one of the most swift backhanded 'thank you's I have received to this day. My heart swelled and broke all within the space of seconds. What impressed me about this young man, though, was what happened at the end of the day. A handful of about five young friends banded together to support and challenge one another to implement what they had heard.

Earlier this year I received a request for The Culture Project team to speak to some senior students in Sydney. This school was one where the students had some rough experiences and their teachers had big hearts. The teacher informed me that this cohort had experienced peer-on-peer sexual assault. The police had been involved, some students left, some students stayed and it remained a tricky climate for the cohort. The teacher invited the team to come and speak to the religion class on St John Paul II's Theology of the Body.

When we were setting up the chairs for the presentation, the teacher informed me that the students didn't know that The Culture Project would be attending today, because if the students knew we were there, they would not have shown up. As the students walked in the doors, males and females were shepherded to different rooms. They were not so happy about the surprise guest speakers and were a tough crowd, to say the least. We spent that double period sharing stories and experiences around questions like, what is love? What is the difference between love and use? What does it look like to live in a way that we aren't used, and we don't use others? Over our time together, walls came down they shared their stories and asked questions. By the end of it, one of the girls even said, "we want to be missionaries too."

Our young people are facing morally challenging decisions, peer pressure and many are suffering from anxiety, depression, self-harm, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. At the root of these symptoms of pain is a human person who was made not to use and be used, but rather to love and be loved. Our young people are starving to know there's something better than what they're offered by the culture. They're aching for something that won't leave them feeling more empty the next morning. They're dying to live a life that's more than what they've experienced. What I have witnessed over the last seven years is that, when we share the fundamental truth of the dignity of the human person with beauty and affirm the goodness of where their desires can take them, they are filled with hope.

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# Shakespeare's Heroines vs Chesterton's: Balancing Romance and Reality

*Angela Schumann*

In 1901 G. K. Chesterton wrote two and a half pages on "The Heroines of Shakespeare". In them he claimed that while the true meaning of a 'hero' as a kind of demi-god archetype had all but been lost in modern literature, suffering instead a dilution to mean a man who is able to "go through a few adventures without hanging himself or taking to drink" (97), in Shakespeare's heroines the proper meaning of 'hero' was embodied.

Chesterton lists three such paragons: Rosalind (*As You Like It*), Isabella (*Measure for Measure*), and Portia (*The Merchant of Venice*). In this paper I will test Chesterton's claim that these characters embody the Elizabethan ideal of the holy, heroic, "pure woman" (98). Through a close analysis of Shakespeare's texts, I will explore the darker elements of their behaviour and speech, which suggest that Shakespeare's heroines are much more complex than they at first appear.

*As You Like It*'s protagonist Rosalind does, indeed, seem to fulfil Chesterton's vision of an unproblematic heroine. Rosalind shows a kind of heroic virtue in accompanying Celia into exile in the forest and taking on the 'man's' role of defender in boots and hose, complete with a sword. In keeping with the genre of 'pure' comedy, Rosalind does not really have a dark side. Like Shakespeare's other comic heroines, she does have—unlike the men in the play—a fairly good understanding of herself.

*Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice* are tragi-comedies, however, and as such allow for greater psychological complexity in their characters. Isabella has been **SEEN** by critics, audiences, other characters, and herself as a paragon of virtue. Chesterton counts her among the "high and snowy peaks which catch the last rays of the belief in the actual divinity of man" (98). A.W. Schlegel once said that "the heavenly purity of her mind is not even stained with one unholy thought: in the humble robes of the novice she is a very angel of light" (64). However, a close reading of the text reveals that Isabella has a dark side that she herself is not consciously aware of.

Isabella is about to enter a convent when she is called upon to defend her brother, who has been sentenced to death by the wicked Angelo because of a legal technicality that finds him guilty of fornication. Isabella's first few lines in the play demonstrate her lack of self-awareness:

*Isab.* And have you nuns no farther privileges?
*Nun*. Are not these large enough?
*Isab*. Yes, truly. I speak not as desiring more,
But rather wishing a more strict restraint

Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare. (1.4.3-5)

Isabella has presumably only now been introduced to the extremely ascetic lifestyle of the Poor Clares, and her question suggests that her initial reaction is one of shock. However, upon being challenged, Isabella refuses to acknowledge her disappointment to the nun or to herself, and instead disguises her vice as virtue, claiming (unconvincingly) that her shock was due to a lack of restrictions in this highly restrictive order (if she was genuinely concerned by a lack of restriction, she would have asked, 'And have you nuns so many privileges?' or 'have you nuns no farther restrictions?').

Isabella's self-deception does not end here. Isabella is, as her name suggests, very beautiful, and has a strong sexual magnetism that gives her power over men. Her brother Claudio alludes to it when he says:

in her youth
There is a prone and speechless dialect,
Such as move men (1.2.163-165).

Lucio invokes it when he says:

*Lucio*. Assay the power you have
*Isab*. My power? Alas, I doubt.
*Lucio*. …when maidens sue,
Men give like gods (1.4.76-77, 80-81).

While denying that she has it, Isabella also subconsciously uses her sexual attractiveness to manipulate Angelo in pleading for her brother's life.

This psychological split, or self-deception, is indicated through a series of parapraxes (or 'Freudian slips') in her speech. During her impassioned discourse at their first meeting, Isabella argues that if Angelo imagines himself as being on trial, "mercy will then breathe within your lips, / Like man new made" (2.2.78-9). Whilst at a conscious level 'man new made' refers to the baptised Christian who has been saved from sin, it is also a reference to procreation. There is also an auditory pun here, as 'man new made' sounds the same as 'man knew maid', which, in the biblical sense of the verb, again signals intercourse.

Isabella can see that she has had an effect on Angelo, as he has turned his body and hidden his face from her (143). When Angelo turns to leave, and Isabella fails to prevent him ("Gentle my Lord, turn back"– 2.2.144), in desperation she cries "Hark, how I'll bribe you: good my Lord turn back" (2.2.150). When Angelo challenges her on this, "How! bribe me?" (147) she clarifies, with "prayers from preserved souls" (2.2.158).

Isabella and Angelo would both be aware that a prayer cannot in the proper sense be used as a bribe, as prayer cannot be bought, sold or traded, and so the text indicates a gap between Isabella's conscious meaning (that she will have her convent pray for Angelo) and her subconscious meaning (that she will bribe him with sex in exchange for her brother's freedom). She has said this in the heat of the moment in order to grab his attention,

knowing instinctively that it would work, despite not consciously understanding or acknowledging to herself the reason why, and quickly provides an explanation that would mask her deeper meaning from herself.

Consider Isabella's language in Act 2 Scene 4, when Angelo explicitly asks her: if, in order to save your brother's life, "[y]ou must lay down the treasures of your body… What would you do?" (2.4.96,98). She famously responds:

> As much for my poor brother as myself;
> That is, were I under the terms of death,
> Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
> And strip myself to death as to a bed
> That longing have been sick for, ere I'd yield
> My body up to shame. (2.4.99-104)

The highly sexualised imagery of this refusal of sex powerfully illustrates Isabella's cognitive dissonance and self-deception.

Finally, Isabella's projected identity as a devoted sister is undermined by her behaviour. When she is at first persuaded to plead for her brother's life, she states that she does so against her own will: "For which I would not plead, but that I must" (2.2.31). She makes a cold request: "I have a brother is condemn'd to die; / I do beseech you let it be his fault, / And not my brother (2.2.34-6), and when it is denied she immediately gives up: "O just but severe law! / I had a brother then." (2.2.41-2). It is only after she is pushed by Lucio ("You are too cold" 45) that she begins to fight with any conviction. When she visits her brother in prison and assures him

> O, were it but my life,
> I'd throw it down for your deliverance
> As frankly as a pin (3.1.103-5)

her sincerity is questionable. This seems to be her brother's feeling, as it has been observed that there is a missing beat in line 105 before he answers "Thanks, dear Isabel", suggesting that he has his doubts. While Isabella seems to want to see herself as a virtuous and heroic archetype worthy of Chesterton's praise, a close reading shows that her character contains more depth and shadow than at first appears.

In addition to his praise of Isabella, Chesterton claims that *The Merchant of Venice*'s Portia is similarly "the most splendid and magnanimous woman in literature" (99) and "a figure representing the larger conception of generosity and persuasion" (99). Characters in the play seem to see her this way too: "She is fair and, fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtues" (1.1.162-3); "From the four corners of the earth they come / To kiss this shrine, this mortal breathing saint" (2.7.39-40). Portia herself declares "I never did repent for doing good, Nor shall not now" (3.4.10-11).

These claims invite us to examine her conduct in the play. Let us start with the flamboyant Prince of Morocco, who begins his casket test in 2.1 with an appeal to fair-minded colour-

blindness — to be judged, as Martin Luther King put it, not by the colour of his skin but by the content of his character: “Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnish’d sun” (2.1.1-2). It seems to fall on deaf ears, however, because Portia dismisses his unsuccessful attempt with a racist expression of relief: “Let all of his complexion choose me so.” (2.7.79).

We perhaps should not be too hard on Portia for her lack of a twenty-first-century sensibility towards racial difference, but her treatment of Shylock in the trial scene (4.1) shows an undeniable vindictiveness. Given that (as she later explains), Venetian law forbids, as a capital offence, “an alien / … by direct or indirect attempts / … [to] seek the life of any citizen” (4.1.349-51), she could (and should) simply put a stop to the trial the moment she arrives, by explaining his perilous position to Shylock: this would solve Bassanio’s problem, save Antonio unnecessary anguish and send Shylock home empty-handed. Instead, she begins with a barefaced lie (“the Venetian law / Cannot impugn you as you do proceed” 4.1.178-9) and follows it with many others (e.g. “A pound of that same merchant’s flesh is thine. / The court awards it, and the law doth give it.” 4.1.299-300), the purpose of which is to feed Shylock’s hopes, to encourage him to incriminate himself. Her suggestion that he pay for a surgeon to attend, which she knows he will reject, is a lawyer’s trick to entrap him into revealing his murderous intentions (what lawyers call his *mens rea*), and her much-admired plea for mercy, which “droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven” (4.1.185), is in fact another ploy to alienate the sympathies of the court, because it is couched not in universal terms but in a specific appeal to the Christian Redemption:

> Therefore, Jew,
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this,
> That in the course of justice, none of us
> Should see salvation. We do pray for mercy (4.1.197-200)

Since this is meaningless and to somebody of the Jewish faith, Shylock will reject it, and this will further incriminate him in the eyes of his Christian spectators. The whole trial is a game of cat and mouse (“Tarry, Jew, / The law hath yet another hold on you” [4.1.346-7] she says to the already-defeated Shylock), and her relish in the exercise of her new-found power, which almost amounts to sadism, is not confined to Shylock: Antonio, her seeming rival for Bassanio's affections, comes in for a little gratuitous and vindictive cruelty as she gloatingly instructs him, “You must prepare your bosom for his knife” (4.1.245).

It would seem, then, that Chesterton may have romanticised these characters who, though undeniably intelligent, courageous, and idealistic, are nonetheless more complex and problematic than they at first appear.

Rather than being paragons of virtue, as Chesterton (in good company with critics, audiences, other characters, and the ‘heroines’ themselves) believes, the language and behaviour of Isabella and Portia suggest that Shakespeare wrote them with a more problematic, more interesting, and ultimately more human nature than has been recognised.

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# The Fatherhood of Chesterton

*Karl Schmude*

**A** focus on fatherhood may seem marginal and even irrelevant to a conference theme of "Chesterton and Woman", but it goes to the heart of Chesterton's understanding of woman. In sharp comparison with our cultural championing of atomised individuals, marooned in their own moment of time, Chesterton had a different vision. He cherished the human person, not as isolated, but as an integral part of history and community. He saw the ordinary man as fulfilled rather than frustrated by the bonds of marriage and family.

This is the broad context in which I would like to explore Chesterton's conception of fatherhood. His own experience of fatherhood, as for most people, began in his childhood home. He was brought up in a solidly middle-class family in late 19th century London. His great-grandfather had founded a real estate firm called Chestertons, which still exists and is now an international chain. His father, Edward Chesterton, worked in the family business. But Chesterton did not inherit from his father any mercantile or professional skills. He drew rather on his father's intellectual resources, which were abundant, particularly his gifts of literary and artistic imagination. Chesterton was inspired by his father as an amateur, as it were, rather than a professional.

Edward Chesterton was a man of many hobbies. The one that left an indelible impression on the young Gilbert's imagination was that of a toy theatre. In his autobiography, Chesterton recalls that his first childhood memory was of a scene in his father's toy theatre - of a young man crossing a bridge which was set amid mountains in the shadow of a high castle tower. In Chesterton's early imagination, his scene crystallised his experience of boyhood. It conveyed such authenticity that it formed the background of his developing thought. He saw it, he said, as "a sort of symbol of all that I happen to like in imagery and ideas".[1] So vivid was this early impression that, near the end of his life (and his autobiography was the last book he completed), the scene from his father's toy theatre still glowed in his memory, "like a glimpse of some incredible paradise".[2]

If the toy theatre stimulated his imagination, it also helped to mould his mind. The detail of the theatre's design gave Chesterton an early sense of definition and differentiation. "[L]ooking through a square hole, at yellow pasteboard" alerted him to the importance of edges and frames and limits. The experience made clear to him "the boundary-line that brings one thing sharply against another," and so they helped to form his basic understanding of life. They were, he said, "the fragmentary suggestions of a philosophy I have since found to be the truth."[3]

In an essay he wrote on the toy theatre, Chesterton recognised - in one of his earliest paradoxes - that the main principle of art was not expansion. Rather it was limitation. This idea influenced his writing on virtually every subject, not only art but also literature and politics and religion. It gave his developing mind a natural basis for the understanding of higher truths and principles. "All the essential morals which modern men need to learn," he wrote, "could be deduced from this toy [theatre]." He believed that, by reducing the scale

of things, there was now a concentrated space in which great and far-reaching ideas could be dramatised. The small, as it were, was a theatre for capturing the large.[4]

Maisie Ward, Chesterton's first biographer, suggests that his father "meant more to him than his mother, fond as he was of her."[5] His influence on his son was a decisive but uncommon blend of imagination and reason. His father had a powerful visual imagination and a disciplined mind – and these formed the foundation of Chesterton's intellectual outlook as an adult.

For all the happiness of his childhood, Chesterton was nonetheless aware of the limitations of his family upbringing. The Victorian era was renowned for its moral code, but the creed which underpinned it – the beliefs that inspired and guided behaviour - had faded. Chesterton thought that this late 19th century period presented "almost the first irreligious home in all human history". In a letter at the time of his later conversion to Catholicism, he wrote:

"My father is the very best man I ever knew of that generation that never understood the new need of a spiritual authority; and lives almost perfectly by the sort of religion men had when rationalism was rational."[6]

The ultimate human impulses, of course, go beyond reason – not to circumscribe or deny it, but to recognise the truth of Pascal's realisation – that an infinitude of things lie beyond it. As Australia's honorary poet-laureate, Les Murray, once put it: "The answer . . . is not in the same world as the question."[7]

In a biological sense Chesterton was not a father - a terribly sad deprivation for him and his wife Frances. Did the vocation of fatherhood find other outlets? I believe it did - in several forms. One was as a neighbourhood father for the children of Beaconsfield, the small town outside of London where he lived; a second was his 'adoption' of a long-serving secretary, Dorothy Collins, as the daughter he and Frances never had;[8] and a third was in the form of a spiritual fatherhood – through his creation of the priest-detective, Father Brown. Let me expand on each of these in turn.

After moving from London to Beaconsfield in 1909, Gilbert and Frances became part of the community of the town. They developed a strong affinity with the families there, in particular the children. At various times they hosted gatherings at their home. The Christmas party was always a special event. It was only for children – no adults were invited - and the children would be entertained by games the couple would devise, as well as by Gilbert's toy-theatre, which he would dramatise by painting figures and scenery and devising plots for plays.

A more lasting connection was the appointment of Dorothy Collins as Chesterton's secretary. She served faithfully in this role for the last ten years of his life, not only bringing organisational order to his life, but also becoming a close family member. Chesterton dedicated his biography of Thomas Aquinas to her, stating that, "without your help the author would have been more than usually helpless". Dorothy Collins also played a crucial part, in the years after Chesterton's death, in being his literary executor. She served as the

custodian of his voluminous writings, not only archivally but also managing endless copyright issues and compiling new collections of his works.

A further dimension of Chesterton's appreciation of fatherhood was his creation of Father Brown. The character of this priest-detective has often been analysed in terms of his psychological, and even spiritual, approach to the criminal, whom he could understand as a human being prone to the same weaknesses as he himself as a priest.
He also had the advantage of the confessional as a means of penetrating the deepest flaws of human behaviour. By comparison, Sherlock Holmes belonged to the school of conventional detection which analysed the clues left at the scene of the crime. But Chesterton's creation of Father Brown had another dimension, in that he not only solved a crime. He also opened up a higher solution. As a priest, he was inspired by a more ultimate purpose than simply solving a crime, important though that was in the quest for justice. He finally wanted the criminal – and Chesterton wanted us as readers of the Father Brown detective stories – to absorb a fresh insight into the truth and meaning of our earthly existence, and as a result to change his life. This happened with the master criminal, Flambeau, who appeared in so many of the Father Brown stories, and who finally reformed and became a detective himself.

Thus Chesterton saw fatherhood as both a natural and a supernatural condition – a natural basis of marriage and family and community life, and a supernatural source of inspiration and pathway to salvation. Chesterton's insights have much to say to our own society at this time, when the effects of fatherlessness have reached such damaging proportions – in the spread of poverty, the drop in educational performance among children, the growth of drug abuse, the confusion over sexual identity, and the worrying levels of physical and, particularly, mental health.[9]

There is another dimension of insight that we could consider, and that is to search for the connection between fatherhood and manhood – and consider how dependent on fatherhood is a healthy understanding of manhood. Prior to the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, boys – and girls – saw manhood as a pinnacle of character-formation. "Becoming and being a man" was a strong social expectation - manifested in such qualities as courage and endurance and loyalty, especially to home and family. Thus manhood was a fundamental condition of successful fatherhood. Chesterton saw in it as well a higher meaning, in the context of man's Original Sin in the Garden of Eden. We speak of a "manly man," he noted, but not of a "whaley whale" – or any other animal. This difference in language reflected the higher nature and destiny of human beings by comparison with animals:

"If you wanted to dissuade a man [he said] from drinking his tenth whiskey, you would slap him on the back and say, 'Be a man.' No one who wished to dissuade a crocodile from eating his tenth explorer would slap it on the back and say, 'Be a crocodile.' For we have no notion of a perfect crocodile; no allegory of a whale expelled from his whaley Eden."[10](Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 1944)

The responsibilities of manhood were also expressed in the ancient virtue of chivalry. This practice of courtesy between the sexes might now be dismissed as patronising to women, but it was founded on respect – the respect a man owed to a woman, based on her exalted status as a creature of God, as personified in Mary, the Mother of God. It was a sign of the consideration she commanded from men, not a lame concession to her weakness.

As the meaning of sex has unravelled in the past half-century, our culture now tends to equate manhood with "toxic masculinity". But the valuing of manhood in such terms can only be counter-productive. It finally undermines fatherhood – and is bound to license men to engage in ever greater avoidance of responsibility, unrestrained by the obligations of chivalry. It produces weak men, whom women cannot, and will not, respect – or be able to rely on.

Writing on the kinds of books that appeal to boys, Chesterton singled out the love of adventure. Here again, however, contemporary culture is no longer cultivating this boyhood trait. As a fellow conference speaker, Frances Cantrall, has commented:

"I do fear that rather than championing a boy's zest for adventure we have numbed and sedated this great desire. Instead of adventures that test their limits, we sedate them with video games. Instead of risk to pursue relationships, we offer pornography. Which in my humble opinion is a contributing factor of the pandemic of lost boys instead of the men they were created to be. Although these desires may be in comatose state for many, they're not erased."[11]

How might Chesterton have responded to these profound changes to how boys are raised and the impact of this on fatherhood? Our insight into his marriage with Frances, and his relationship with so many children, would suggest two thoughts. One is that he appreciated the strengths of his wife while being ready to respond to her weaknesses. In the way that any married couple complement one other, Chesterton relied on his wife for enormous practical support in so many ways, but in turn he extended psychological and spiritual strength to her during the various bouts of depression that she experienced.[12]

A second thought is that Chesterton saw fatherhood as not simply biological but relational. It is clearly biological, in the sense of a man fathering a child with a woman, but it is not dependent on this. Like St Joseph's foster-relationship with Christ, Chesterton understood that he could still exercise the vocation of fatherhood in an extended way – and more broadly into the surrounding culture.

Let me, finally, explore the wider dimensions of Chesterton's understanding of fatherhood – in the context of the nature of woman, the theme of this conference on "Chesterton and Woman", without which fatherhood would not exist. This is a formidably difficult subject to address in present-day culture, pervaded as it is not only by the assumptions of secular feminism, but now, as a contradictory force, the assertion of sexual identity as being subjective – no longer fixed but fluid, no longer governed by biology but by social pressures and psychological impulses.

Chesterton had, by today's standards, a romantic view of womanhood; or, more accurately, two uplifting beliefs in womanhood - its natural power of procreation, and its supernatural power of spiritual intercession. In the first case, he celebrated the value of woman as the channel of new life – felt even more poignantly in his case because he and Frances could not have children – and in the second case, he had a special devotion to Mary as the Mother of God, as a unique channel of divine life. She gathered up, as he put it, "all those elements of the heart and the higher instincts, which are the legitimate short cuts to the love of God."[13] At one stage Chesterton was looking for an image of Mary to give to the new church in Beaconsfield. Visiting a shop in London, he accompanied the proprietor to a storeroom. There he found an appealing statue, "amid planks and shavings and sawdust," as he noted, "[just] as she stood in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth." It brought to his mind a legendary story about Mary that he had once heard in the Irish county of Donegal – of someone meeting, amid the rocky wastes, a beautiful peasant woman carrying a child. When asked her name, she answered simply: "I am the Mother of God, and this is Himself, and He is the boy you will all be wanting at the last."[14]

If we compare this vision of womanly goodness and grace to the picture we face in present-day culture in the wake of the Sexual Revolution, we see immediately that the contrasts are sharp and painful. They are about lust rather than love; about making use of other human beings rather than cherishing them; and about prizing immediate pleasure above long-term fulfilment. We see, for example, that the Revolution was not just about separating sex from children, with the invention of the Pill and the rise of a contraceptive and IVF culture. It was, finally, about separating sex from love. The pornography that is now pervasive is a celebration, not of beauty, or emotion, or intimacy, but is, fundamentally, a denial of love. It is sex in the marketplace, where price matters rather than value. It is a mechanistic substitute for what should be organic and nurturing. It is fuelled by the delusion that indulgence is better than devotion, and that pleasure can replace tenderness. The latest manifestation of sexual confusion, transgenderism, goes even further: it is not just a denial of sexual distinctiveness, but, even more, a denial of human nature itself.

A perverse parallel has occurred in the intellectual and existential spheres of our culture. In the realm of the intellect, there has been a divorce between the natural understandings of reason and the spiritual revelations of faith. In the realm of experience, there has been a divorce between the motives and the meanings of sex, and its fruits. What have been the results? The separation of reason from faith is causing a destruction of reason through the triumph of subjective feeling over objective reality; while the separation of sex from its procreative and relational fruits is finally leading, not just to a childless society, but to a loveless one as well.

In both cases, Chesterton offered early prophecies - and I'll finish with these statements, both made more than a century ago. The first prophecy spells out what the loss of reason would mean, and the other two comments ponder the effects of sex when it is governed by lust instead of love:

Firstly, on reason:

"The great march of mental destruction will go on. Everything will be denied. Everything will become a creed. It is a reasonable position to deny the stones in the street; it will be a religious dogma to assert them. It is a rational thesis that we are all in a dream; it will be a mystical sanity to say that we are all awake. Fires will be kindled to testify that two and two make four. Swords will be drawn to prove that leaves are green in summer. We shall be left defending, not only the incredible virtues and sanities of human life, but something more incredible still, this huge impossible universe which stares us in the face. We shall fight for visible prodigies as if they were invisible. We shall look on the impossible grass and the skies with a strange courage. We shall be of those who have seen and yet have believed."[15]

And now, two final statements of Chesterton's on sex:

"The next great heresy is going to be simply an attack on morality; and especially on sexual morality. . . . The roots of the new heresy, God knows, are as deep as nature itself, whose flower is the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eye and the pride of life. I say that the man who cannot see this cannot see the signs of the times; cannot see even the sky-signs in the street that are the new sort of signs in heaven. The madness of tomorrow is *not* in Moscow but much more in Manhattan – but most of what was in Broadway is already in Piccadilly. [16]

"The appeal to animal appetite may succeed by its very familiarity. Indecency is not wild and lawless. The danger of indecency is exactly that it is tame, dull, direct, inevitable; a mere law in the members. It is automatic evil. Pride makes a man a devil; but lust makes him a machine.[17]

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[1] G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1936), p. 32.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid., pp.32-33.

[4] G.K. Chesterton, "The Toy Theatre," *Tremendous Trifles* (London: Methuen, 1909), pp.150-51.
[5] Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1944), p.17.

[6] Op.cit., p.392.

[7] https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les/poems/the-knockdown-question-0617195

[8]Aidan Mackey's obituary of Dorothy Collins called her "The Daughter the Chestertons Never Had." This appeared first in the London *Daily Telegraph* on 10 September 1988 and was reprinted in *The Defendant*, Autumn 2018, p.3.

[9]Bill Muehlenberg, "The Facts of Fatherlessness," May 2013 - https://billmuehlenberg.com/2013/05/17/the-facts-on-fatherlessness-part-one/ and https://billmuehlenberg.com/2013/05/17/the-facts-on-fatherlessness-part-two/
[10] Ward, op.cit., p.176.

[11] Email to Karl Schmude, 14 September 2021.

[12] I am indebted to Brandon Vogt for his illuminating presentation on "Chesterton as Husband…and Father" to the 37th Annual G.K. Chesterton Conference in Kansas City, Kansas, on August 2, 2019.

[13] G. K. Chesterton, "Mary and the Convert," *The Well and The Shallows* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1935), p.174.

[14] G. K. Chesterton, *Christendom in Dublin* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1933), p. 99.

[15] G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (London: Bodley Head, 1905), p. 308.

[16] *G.K.'s Weekly*, June 19, 1926.

[17] *Daily News*, February 19, 1910. Both of the last two quotations appeared in *The Man Who Was Orthodox: A Selection from the Uncollected Writings of G.K. Chesterton*; arranged and introduced by A.L. Maycock (London: Dennis Dobson, 1963), pp.122-124.

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