

# The Arena

## *CAUSA NOSTRAE LAETITIAE*

*(Dedicated to the University of Notre Dame, Indiana)*



*“Gilbert Keith Chesterton, English journalist and novelist who spent six weeks lecturing at Notre Dame last fall, has honored the university with the dedication of an original poem, “The Arena,” to the memory of his stay here.”*

South Bend Tribune | Friday, March 13, 1931

“Dedicates Poem to Notre Dame: Chesterton Sends Original Manuscript of His Work to University.”

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There uprose a golden giant<sup>1</sup>  
On the gilded house of Nero<sup>2</sup>  
Even his far-flung flaming shadow<sup>3</sup> and his image swollen large<sup>4</sup>  
Looking down on the dry whirlpool  
Of the round Arena spinning  
As a chariot-wheel goes spinning; and the chariots at the charge.<sup>5</sup>

And the molten monstrous visage  
Saw the pageants, saw the torments,  
Down the golden dust undazzled saw the gladiators go,  
Heard the cry in the closed desert<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The *Colossus Neronis* (Colossus of Nero) was an enormous statue of himself (appx. 120 feet tall) which the Emperor commissioned from the Greek sculptor Zenodorus sometime between A.D. 64 and 68. It was erected in an atrium on the Oppian hill in Rome, part of his sprawling palace complex constructed at the same period (Albertson, 95-6).

<sup>2</sup> The *Domus Aurea* (House of Gold) is a name sometimes given to Nero’s entire palace estate spanning the Palatine, Oppian, and Caelian hills; sometimes it refers more specifically to the pavilioned construction on the Oppian, outside of which the great statue was erected. Though containing over 300 rooms, it had not a single bedroom: it was a pleasure palace designed for ostentatious entertainment, rather than practicality (*see* Turney). In an ironic twist, the title “*Domus aurea*” was appropriated by Christians and applied to Our Lady, eventually being included in The Litany of Loreto.

<sup>3</sup> Nero’s construction project began after the infamous Great Fire of Rome (A.D. 64). Nero blamed the fire on the new religious movement known as Christianity and made it a pretext for its brutal persecution. However, some ancient historians speculated that Nero himself commanded the fire precisely to clear space for his opulent palace (*cf.* Tacitus, *Annals* 15).

<sup>4</sup> “Image swollen large”: A rich allusion, Chesterton may be referring to the Colossus itself, which Pliny and other sources alleged to have presented Nero as a form of the god Sol (*see* “Colossus of Nero”). Alternately, Chesterton may refer simply to Nero’s monstrous ego: apart from the evidence for this that the Colossus and the Domus Aurea themselves represent, a colorful well-known account, which may be reflected in the following lines, tells how Nero bribed his way into participation in the A.D. 67 Olympic games, where he (of course) won every competition in which he competed, including a chariot race; this, despite his having fallen from his vehicle and never completing the course, on the grounds that he *would* have won if he had finished (*see* “Going for Gold”)!

<sup>5</sup> From its vantage point on the Oppian, the Colossus would have overlooked both the Circus Maximus as well as Nero’s own amphitheater, which may have been built (or re-built) after the fire in A.D. 64 (*see* “The Amphitheater in Rome at the Time of Nero”). Contrary to popular misconception, chariot races were held, not in the round arenas, but in the larger oval-shaped circuses. Incidentally, the Colossus was eventually moved beside the new, later-built Flavian Amphitheatre by Hadrian *circa* A.D. 128. Traditionally, the statue is considered the source of the arena’s ultimate popular name: the Colosseum.

<sup>6</sup> “Golden dust / closed desert”: arena floors were constructed of wood and then covered with sand – hence the name, “arena”, from the Latin *hārēna, -ae* (alt. *ārēna, -ae*), which literally means “sand.”

*Te salutant morituri*,<sup>7</sup>

As the slaves of doom went stumbling, shuddering, to the shades below.<sup>8</sup>

    "Lord of Life, of lyres and laughter,<sup>9</sup>  
    Those about to die salute thee,  
At thy godlike fancy feeding men with bread and beasts with men,<sup>10</sup>  
    But for us the Fates point deathward  
    In a thousand thumbs thrust downward,<sup>11</sup>  
And the Dog of Hell is roaring through the lions in their den."<sup>12 13</sup>

    I have seen, where a strange country<sup>14</sup>  
    Opened its secret plains about me,  
One great golden dome stand lonely with its golden image, one<sup>15</sup>  
    Seen afar, in strange fulfillment,  
    Through the sunlit Indian summer<sup>16</sup>  
That Apocalyptic portent that has clothed her with the Sun.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Recorded in Suetonius's "Life of the Twelve Caesars," a group of convicts sentenced to die in a mock naval battle entertainment for the Emperor Claudius in A.D. 52 greeted the emperor with the phrase, "*Avē Imperātor, moritūrī tē salutant*" – "Hail, Emperor, we who are about to die salute thee!" No primary sources support that the phrase was thereafter regularly used in gladiatorial combats despite many popular later medieval legends attesting to this (*see* Leon).

<sup>8</sup> Chesterton is "telescoping history" a bit, perhaps, with allusions relevant to the later Colosseum that might not have pertained to Nero's wooden amphitheater (*cf.* BWH, *vii*). Below the floor of the Colosseum was the *hypogeum*, a two-leveled subterranean network of tunnels and holding areas where gladiatorial combatants, slaves, and wild beasts were held before their "show" began. They entered through tunnels from outside the Colosseum. They would then come into the arena itself via vertical shafts leading upward (*see* Mueller).

<sup>9</sup> "Lord of Life," an ironical prefiguration of Christ, may here refer to the god Jupiter, with whom Nero had some identification, minting coins with his own visage on one side and Jupiter's on the other (*see* "Nero and Jupiter"). Nero was also, famously, a lyre player (*not* a fiddler!), and so Chesterton may be punning: Nero was also a leading *liar*, such as when he blamed Christians for the Great Fire. Finally, Nero would notoriously indulge in public entertainments, capable of "mov[ing] his audience to tears and laughter at once," though it was seen as being below his station and class and was thus quite scandalous (*see* Dahm).

<sup>10</sup> Chesterton's riff on Juvenal's satirical observation about the Roman populace's complacency earned by "bread and circuses," here focusing more blame on the ruler rather than the people.

<sup>11</sup> According to some accounts, the signal by which the crowds at gladiatorial combats would indicate that a combatant's life should be spared or else that he should be killed was "*pollice verso*," or "with a turn of the thumb" (*see* "The Gladiator and the Thumb").

<sup>12</sup> Cerberus, the "Hound of Hell," was the three-headed canine guardian of the underworld in Greek mythology.

<sup>13</sup> Note how the poem is structurally divided into three sets of three stanzas, a quotation comprising each third stanza.

<sup>14</sup> South Bend, Indiana, was for Chesterton a "strange country," as a native Englander. No aspersions on the Midwest should be inferred.

<sup>15</sup> The (unimaginatively named) Main Building of the campus of the University of Notre Dame, with its iconic golden dome topped by a statue of the Blessed Mother, is an iconic symbol of the institution (*see* "Explore Campus").

<sup>16</sup> A play on words (Chesterton was, after all, in the state of Indiana). The high temperature in South Bend on the day of the Notre Dame – Navy game (October 11, 1930) was the 15<sup>th</sup> warmest on record, at 79°F (NOAA).

<sup>17</sup> *Cf.* Revelation (or "Apocalypse," in some translations) 12:1: "*And a great sign appeared in heaven: A woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*" Indeed, according to Dr. Robin Jensen of Notre Dame's Theology department, this image from Revelation was precisely the intent of the sculptor's design for the golden statue atop the University's dome (*see* Gates). Was this fact pointed out to

She too looks on the Arena<sup>18</sup>  
 Sees the gladiators grapple,  
 She whose names are Seven Sorrows<sup>19</sup> and the Cause of All Our Joy,<sup>20</sup>  
 Sees the pit that stank with slaughter  
 Scoured to make the courts of morning  
 For the cheers of jesting kindred and the scampering of a boy.

"Queen of Death and deadly weeping"<sup>21</sup>  
 Those about to live salute thee,  
 Youth untroubled; youth untutored; hateless war and harmless  
 mirth  
 And the New Lord's larger largesse  
 Holier bread and happier circus,<sup>22</sup>  
 Since the Queen of Sevenfold Sorrow has brought joy upon the  
 earth."

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Chesterton by someone there during a tour? Or was his artist's eye simply honed to pick up on the inspiration and intent of a fellow artist?

<sup>18</sup> Notre Dame Stadium, "The House That Rockne Built," was constructed in 1930, and dedicated in a ceremony during Chesterton's visit to the campus. He had a seat on the platform and was uproariously cheered by the student body as he made his way to take it (*see* Hope).

<sup>19</sup> "Seven Sorrows": The devotion to Our Lady's sorrows or "dolours" dates to the late Medieval period. The seven traditionally enumerated are as follow (*cf.* Fenelon):

- (1) *Simeon's prophecy;*
- (2) *The Flight into Egypt;*
- (3) *The Loss of the Child Christ in the Temple;*
- (4) *Meeting Jesus on the Way of the Cross;*
- (5) *The Crucifixion;*
- (6) *The Removal from the Cross;*
- (7) *Christ's Burial.*

<sup>20</sup> A title of Mary from the Litany of Loreto. Its Latin form, *Causa Nostrae Laetitiae*, is the subtitle to the poem.

<sup>21</sup> *Cf.* Chesterton, "Mary and the Convert," in *The Well and the Shallows*:

*Our Lady, reminding us especially of God Incarnate, does in some degree gather up and embody all those elements of the heart and the higher instincts, which are the legitimate short cuts to the love of God. Dealing with those personal feelings, even in this rude and curt outline, is therefore very far from easy. I hope I shall not be misunderstood if the example I take is merely personal; since it is this particular part of religion that really cannot be impersonal. It may be an accident, or a highly unmerited favour of heaven, but anyhow it is a fact, that I always had a curious longing for the remains of this particular tradition, even in a world where it was regarded as a legend. I was not only haunted by the idea while still stuck in the ordinary stage of schoolboy scepticism; I was affected by it before that, before I had shed the ordinary nursery religion in which the Mother of God had no fit or adequate place. I found not long ago, scrawled in very bad handwriting, screeds of an exceedingly bad imitation of Swinburne, which was, nevertheless, apparently addressed to what I should have called a picture of the Madonna. And I can distinctly remember reciting the lines of the "Hymn To Proserpine," out of pleasure in their roll and resonance; but deliberately directing them away from Swinburne's intention, and supposing them addressed to the new Christian Queen of life, rather than to the fallen Pagan queen of death.*

*"But I turn to her still; having seen she shall surely abide in the end;  
 Goddess and maiden and queen, be near me now and befriend."*

*And I had obscurely, from that time onwards, the very vague but slowly clarifying idea of defending all that Constantine had set up, just as Swinburne's Pagan had defended all he had thrown down.*

<sup>22</sup> *Cf.* note 10. Contrasting the bread given by the Roman Emperor, here the "holier bread" of the Eucharist is in view: a food not merely to placate slaves, but truly to set them free.

Burns above the broad arena  
Where the whirling centuries circle,  
Burns the Sun-clothed on the summit, golden-sheeted, golden shod,  
Like a sun-burst on the mountains,  
Like the flames upon the forest  
Of the sunbeams of the sword-blades of the Gladiators of God.

And I saw them shock the whirlwind  
Of the World of dust and dazzle:  
And thrice they stamped, a thunderclap; and thrice the sand-wheel swirled;  
And thrice they cried like thunder<sup>23</sup>  
On Our Lady of the Victories,  
The Mother of the Master of the Masterers of the World.<sup>24</sup>

"Queen of Death and Life undying  
Those about to live salute thee;  
Not the crawlers with the cattle; looking deathward with the swine,  
But the shout upon the mountains  
Of the men that live for ever  
Who are free of all things living but a Child; and He was thine."<sup>25</sup>

— *G.K. Chesterton (1930)*

*Annotations by Joe Grabowski, 2024*

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<sup>23</sup> It is very plausible to surmise that Chesterton would have heard at least once, at some point between the dedication of the stadium and the next day's game against Navy, Notre Dame's famous fight song, of the lyrics to which this stanza is very redolent, especially: "*Cheer, cheer for old Notre Dame, / Wake up the echoes cheering her name, / Send a volley cheer on high, / Shake down the thunder from the sky.*"

<sup>24</sup> However influenced Chesterton's poetical language may have been by the Fight Song, the event he is describing here is clearly the traditional huddle of the team before taking the field wherein they three times cry, "Our Lady of Victory, pray for us!"

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Galatians 4:30-5:1: "What saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman. So then, brethren, **we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of the free: by the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free.** Stand fast, and be not held again under the yoke of bondage" [*emphasis added*].

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[*The quotation alluded to in n. 8 is from the "Prefatory Note," p. vii: "[I]t is the chief value of legend to mix up the centuries while preserving the sentiment; to see all ages in a sort of splendid foreshortening. That is the use of tradition: it telescopes history."*]
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