

**CHOICES, DILEMMAS AND PARADOXES: CONFLICTED  
FEMININITY IN THE FICTION OF DOROTHY L. SAYERS**

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## Choices, Dilemmas and Paradoxes: Conflicted Femininity in the Fiction of Dorothy L.

### Sayers

Harriet Vane, the protagonist of Dorothy L. Sayers' *Gaudy Night*, utters the following doubts during a conversation with Lord Peter Wimsey:

But what are you going to do about the people who are cursed with both hearts and brains?

[...]

Well, that's just the problem, isn't it? I'm beginning to believe they've got to choose.

Not compromise?

I don't think the compromise works. (*Gaudy Night* 77)

This passage from Sayers' 1935 novel *Gaudy Night* sketches an intriguing conflict. People who are both intelligent and able to love are apparently cursed, the reason for which is that they *must* choose between one and the other. At least, that is what Harriet Vane believes. To her, there seems to be no possible way in which a compromise could be made. What is interesting is that by people she means educated women, like herself. Main characters like Harriet would not have been the subject of a story a decade or two before the publication of this book. In *Gaudy Night*, however, the story is all about educated women, which is quite logical since the setting of the story is a women's college in Oxford in the 1930s.

The clash between a woman's head and heart is the central conflict that we find in Dorothy L. Sayers' life, in her novel *Gaudy Night*, and in the lives of educated women of the 1920s and 1930s in Britain. Herself an Oxford graduate and a detective novelist, like Harriet, Sayers has experienced certain dilemmas in her life that are arguably aired through the character of Harriet, as well as the other women of the fictional college of Shrewsbury. It would seem that these conflicts are not hers alone. Sayers wrote this novel, of which some say it is her best work, during the Interwar period. The Long Weekend, as it is also called, was a

time of change for women on both a professional and educational level, as well as a personal level. With *Gaudy Night*, Sayers provided the public with a semi-autobiographical book that is also a recording of British society in the 1920s and 1930s, something that is of great value for those people interested in the changing attitudes concerning women and femininity in the early twentieth century.

By providing a brief outline of the history of female detectives and female detective writers, as well as a sketch of British society in the Interwar Period and some information on the rules of detective fiction during this period, a context is provided in which the conflict between head and heart in Sayers' life and in *Gaudy Night* can be researched.

### **Every Woman is a Human Being**

The struggle of women to be admitted in the world of detection has taken place not so long ago. The efforts of those women have paved the way for writers such as Sayers. Ever since the detective genre was founded by, as many people believe, Edgar Allen Poe, the world of detection had been dominated by male writers and detectives. That is not to say that there were no female detectives or novelists before the fiction of among others Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie. It appears, as Stephen Knight points out, that in the 1860s, when the genre slowly began to find its form, that there was a demand for female sleuths. The fact that stories such as *The Female Detective* by Andrew Forrester Junior and *Revelations of a Lady Detective*, possibly written by William Stephens Hayward, were both created in 1864 “suggests that publishers knew there was a substantial female audience for crime fiction by this time – as of course there had been for [...] all fiction” (*Death* 36). It would be presumptuous to assume that merely because detective stories concern murder and other types of sins, women would not be interested in such books. On the contrary, they were avid fans of gothic fiction, a genre that can be regarded as having influenced the detective story. Women

enjoyed this type of fiction just as much as men did, but it might be possible to suggest that they liked to see a woman do the job. The interest in female detectives re-appeared some decades later, after Sherlock Holmes had become immensely popular and other writers imitated the story line of a hero whose masculine traits are emphasised (Knight, *Form* 108).

At the turn of the century, stories with titles such as *The Experiences of Loveday Brooke*; *Dorcas Dene, Detective: Her Adventures*; *Dora Myrl, The Lady Detective*; and *Lady Molly of Scotland Yard* appeared alongside the popular stories featuring male detectives. The British crime writer Julian Symons regarded all these women as nonsensical because they remain perfectly Victorian in the face of crime and detection (Knight, *Death* 79). It was not until later, with writers such as Sayers and her treatment of the female detective, that these characters became more accepted. It is not difficult to see why it was so hard to change the view people had of women and detectives in a time when Victorian morals were rampant. Most detective fiction was written as short stories that were published in magazines such as *The Strand* and *Pearson's*, which were mostly intended for men to be read, creating a rather limited female audience (Knight, *Cambridge* 81). This also meant that female writers had a hard time having their work published. Baroness Orczy and Catherine Louisa Pirkis were two women who were fairly well known, but even they were initially writers of romances and had already established a name before entering the world of detection (Knight, *Death* 78-79). Male domination of the genre was to a considerable extent circumnavigated when at the beginning of the twentieth century, the novel became the dominant form of literature and detective fiction began to appear in novel format. These novels were mostly distributed via circulating libraries, institutes that had been established in the early eighteenth century (Erickson 574). From the beginning onwards, their audience had consisted mostly of women, amounting up to “a 75 percent female audience” in the early twentieth century (Knight, *Cambridge* 81). Via these libraries, women had access to detective fiction, and women writers

had the opportunity to have their stories published. This explains how female detectives and their authors could gain a foothold in the early decades of the twentieth century, a time that was very important for women.

The two decades after World War I were years of paradoxes. Some researchers characterise the time as frivolous and jolly, and yet others regard it as a gloomy and sombre period. It was a time of peace, and yet war sentiments were prevalent. However one wishes to pinpoint these two decades, what many scholars agree on is that they were beneficial towards the cause of the emancipation of women, or, as Robert Graves and Alan Hodge put it, “[t]he Great War [...] freed the Englishwoman” (35). Their role in society changed progressively compared to women of the previous centuries. Things that changed were among others their style of clothes, make-up, smoking and drinking (Graves and Hodge 35, 38), though these alterations were gradually implemented. It became normal for women in the 1920s to smoke cigarettes, but only in certain places and quite a number of people were still opposed to it. Some ten years later, Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night* smokes and drinks and no comment is made upon that. Next to these somewhat trivial, yet at the same time also important changes, life for women improved to the extent that they had relatively more freedom. They were more likely to be employed, or go somewhere unaccompanied. Laws were implemented that equalised the balance between men and women concerning judicial matters (Graves and Hodge 43). One of the most important adjustments was the admission of women into universities on a scale that had never been seen before. Women were granted full membership to the University of Oxford in 1919 (Graves and Hodge 41) and the University of Cambridge, though refusing them full membership, did allow women to take degrees in 1921, albeit under a great number of protests from male undergraduates (Graves and Hodge 42). One of the first women to have graduated from Oxford was Dorothy L. Sayers in 1915. Her degree was not fully recognised at the time, but she was among the first to receive a degree when that became

possible in 1920 (Miskimmin 439).

It is erroneous to suppose that because women gained more freedom compared to the Victorian period, they were now completely free to choose as they pleased. The strict morals of the previous decades continued to be very much present in society, and its vast majority was still of the opinion that the ultimate goal in life for women was to get married and live a domestic life. It got as far as marriage bars, which were introduced in among others the “teaching profession, [...] the civil service, [and] the BBC” (BBC). These bars meant that women could have a job until they were married, after which they were no longer allowed to have an occupation, “except under exceptional circumstances” (BBC). For many women, though certainly not for all, this conflict between their own expectations and the roles imposed on them by society had a large impact on their lives, as we shall see in *Gaudy Night*.

### **Secretive Beauty**

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was a woman who cared little for what society thought and lived her life the way she wanted to. Sayers was born in 1893, “in the twilight of the Victorian era” (Reitz, “Sayers”), thus making her a good judge of the shifting attitudes and morals in society. She was an only child who was encouraged both in her writing as well as in her education, and this led to her Oxford degree in Medieval Literature and Modern Languages from Somerville College, an experience she drew inspiration from for her novel *Gaudy Night*. After her degree she had jobs as a teacher in Hull and London; she worked as a publisher’s assistant; she was an assistant to an Oxford friend at a school in France; and she worked at an advertising company (Kenney 3). The moment she was able to live off the earnings of her books she stopped working, which was rather brave:

It must be remembered that, for a woman in the first quarter of this century, such a decision carried greater liabilities than it does today, when women’s choices are wider.

It has never been easy to support oneself by writing, and Sayers's decision to attempt to do so was courageous, although she would probably refuse such a label. (Kenney 4)

The last part of this quotation describes Sayers' attitude to being placed in a box, which she was weary of, as we shall see when we consider her position on the question of feminism.

Another aspect of Sayers' life which cannot be placed in a box is her turbulent love life, quite uncommon for this Post-Victorian period. Some scholars see her experiences reflected in the character of Harriet Vane. Sayers had a love affair with among others John Courton, a novelist from Ukraine. This relationship ended in a disappointment for Sayers, and many scholars see the character of the arrogant and narcissistic Philip Boyes in *Strong Poison* as a representation of Courton. Sayers continued her love life by having an affair with her neighbour Bill White, by whom she got a son, John Anthony. She did not tell her family that she had a son, though she made sure he was looked after, and it was only after her death that the truth came out (Reitz, "Sayers"). After this affair, she met and married Oswald Atherton Fleming, commonly known as Mac in 1926. Like her previous relationships, her marriage did not bring Sayers much happiness. She was pressed to be the care taker of the family, as she had a son to support and a husband who through the years grew to be increasingly traumatised because of World War I experiences (Miskimmin 440). Sayers is famous for her detective fiction, but also for her religious writings and her translations of Dante. She kept writing till her death in 1957.

### **Should Genius Marry?**

For Dorothy L. Sayers, the conflict between head and heart consisted of the struggle to combine the clue-puzzle and its rules with the novel of manners. Sayers wrote her detective stories during the 1920s and 1930s, a time when the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction

was at its height. Most literature written during this period in Britain can be characterised as a clue-puzzle story. A work of fiction written in this style resembles a cross-word puzzle, which was immensely popular at the time: the case is neatly laid out and all clues are presented (Miskimmin 440). These characteristics are indispensable to the notion of fair play, which was one of the most important elements of the clue-puzzle to be adhered to. This concept made it possible for the reader to investigate the case alongside the detective. Indeed, even though many readers did not actually actively engage in the process of investigation, they knew they had the option to do so. As a matter of fact, many writers who wrote in the style of the clue-puzzle were scolded if they withheld clues or other sorts of information (Knight, *Cambridge* 79). One famous example is *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie. In this book, the narrator of the story turns out to be the murderer. Readers did not foresee this and the concept of fair play was violated.

Having mentioned *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, a very short assessment of the book which kick started Christie's career will be provided. Though Christie is less specific about the whole topic of women and emancipation, she, like Sayers, does integrate it in her books, thereby acknowledging the changing position of women. Christie incorporated femininity in her fiction as a means of escapism. Before the war, detective fiction "was the one place where the reader might reasonably expect violence" (Light 69). After 1918, this violence was often too much for many victims, as Christie was well aware of, having been a nurse during the Great War. With her fiction, she wanted to give them some repose from all the violence and images of heroic men as found in pre-war detective fiction. Instead, she offered them "literature of convalescence" (Light 69). Christie did so in the shape of Hercule Poirot, with his effeminate manners, knowledge of domestic affairs and detection skills that border on feminine intuition. By creating Poirot, Christie has influenced the detective genre, making it more feminine.



Coming back to the clue-puzzle, fair play was important, as said. Other characteristics of the genre are an enclosed setting, usually a country house, or if placed in the city, some apartment or other secluded area; social enclosure (lower classes usually play minor roles); the politics of the time are largely ignored, or slightly tipped on; and the style of writing, as well as the sleuthing character, are rational and rely not so much on emotions (Knight, *Cambridge* 78-79). These and other rules to clue-puzzle stories were formalised in 1929, when Ronald Knox presented his “Decalogue” or “Ten Commandments”. In his list, he wrote down ten rules that detective authors should adhere to make sure their stories would give readers a fair chance. These rules, even though not all of them were used by all writers, give an accurate description of what one can expect in a clue-puzzle story (Miskimmin 440). Dorothy L. Sayers and some other crime writers, among whom were Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Crofts, R. Austin Freeman and E.C. Bentley, founded the Detection Club in 1929 (Kenney 32). The club was based on an oath which all members adhered to and candidate-members had to swear on to be admitted. Part of the Oath was the question: “Do you solemnly swear never to conceal a vital clue from the reader?” (Gillies), thus indicating once again the importance of fair play, as Knox had asserted himself.

The first few books that Dorothy L. Sayers wrote were all good examples of a clue-puzzle story. She started with the novel *Whose Body?* in 1923, bringing Lord Peter Wimsey to the page for the first time. This was not, however, the first time she had written anything, or had anything published. She had started “composing verse in childhood” (Kenney 6) and continued to write poetry at Oxford, during which period some of her poems were published. She was not a great poet, but writing poetry “provided useful practice in the careful employment of language and attention to form” (Kenney 7). She would later use this ability in her detective fiction, as well as for works she wrote and translated later in her career (Kenney 6-7). An example of her use of poetic language is a description of Oxford in April:

April was running out, chilly and fickle, but with the promise of good things to come; and the city wore the withdrawn and secretive beauty that wraps her about in vacation. [...] in Radcliffe Square the Camera slept like a cat in the sunshine, disturbed only by the occasional visit of a slow-footed don; [...] punts and canoes, new-fettled for the summer term, began to put forth upon the Cherwell like the varnished buds upon the horse-chestnut tree, but as yet there was no press of traffic upon the shining reaches.

*(Gaudy Night 267)*

Catherine Kenney, who has written a comprehensive book on Sayers, puts forward that even though Sayers may have started with poetry, it was not the basis for her later job as a novelist. It was “prefigured, not in the early verse-making, but in the little girl who enjoyed making up wildly dramatic stories to act out” (Kenney 7). Sayers would come to write eleven Wimsey novels in total, ending in 1936 with the novel *Busman’s Honeymoon*. She furthermore wrote several short stories that featured Lord Peter Wimsey, as well as a series of fictionalised letters called *The Wimsey Papers*. Next to the Wimsey novels, she also wrote detective fiction featuring the character of Montague Egg, as well as many essays and some excellent introductions to the *Omnibus on Crime*.

In the early twenties, Sayers wrote a letter to a friend in which she mentioned that she might take up the business of detective writing, as it “might go some way towards providing bread and cheese” (Miskimmin 440). Her monetary problems were not the only reason to start, but it was indeed a fairly easy way of making money, considering the fact the genre was booming at the time. Most of Sayers’ novels are clue-puzzle stories, as is quite logical given the period she was writing in, the interest of her audience and her membership of the Detection Club. However, this does not mean that she was completely satisfied with the genre, or that she stuck to the rigid clue-puzzle rules all the way during her detective years. It would be too strongly put to say that during the course of her career, Sayers grew to dislike

the genre. This would greatly undermine her membership of the Detection Club, as well as her position as its president in subsequent years. Indeed, she “was able to enjoy [...] the exquisite refinement of the pure-puzzle story” (Kenney 35). However, by the time Sayers had landed a contract that provided her with enough money to live quite comfortably by, she quit her job and started writing that kind of fiction that she had been planning to write for some time. Kenney suggests that “this argues for how little she was actually motivated by money-making in her writing” (6), the practice of which had in the early twenties somewhat forced her to write what would be well received by the audience. Sayers is not solely remembered because her stories were such neat clue-puzzles. That is more true for her fellow novelists like Agatha Christie. What Sayers is remembered for is her desire to take the genre of the detective novel, give it a good shake, and create something “less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel” (Sayers qtd. in Kenney 26). Sayers wanted to incorporate characteristics of novels such as were written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, thus effectively creating a conjunction of the detective story and the more traditional novel. The tension that Sayers felt “between an adherence to genre and the frustrations created by the generic restraints placed upon her literary impulses” (Miskimmin 443) is reflected in Harriet Vane’s problems with her latest novel in *Gaudy Night*.

One may ask why she wanted to embark on such a mission and not simply follow what others did and what was liked by the general audience. The answer is both simple to formulate and difficult in execution. Sayers wished to claim “a place for the detective story in the house of fiction”, so that other people would see “the mystery as a genuine novel with claims to consideration as literature” (Kenney 26). She wanted, in effect, to return to the novels such as had been written by Wilkie Collins and Sheridan Le Fanu (Kenney 26), the latter of the two happening to be the subject of a study that Harriet Vane undertakes in *Gaudy Night*. This was easier said than done, and she would feel the burden of this conflict between

rational detective fiction and more novel-like fiction throughout the rest of her detection years. Halfway her career, in the early 1930s, Sayers ventured to put more literary elements in her stories, such as rounder characters, more emotions and discussions concerning themes that were usually disregarded in detective stories, like “social responsibility” (Miskimmin 442). She did this by writing the book *Strong Poison*, the first story in which Harriet Vane appears. One of Knox’ rules was that the detective ought not to marry or have a romance, as that would upset the detective story. Sayers, though at the beginning of her career a follower of this rule (Kenney 31), chose to abandon it, and she made Lord Peter Wimsey fall in love with Harriet. Both characters develop throughout the book, and it was the use of these “‘literary’ elements that [...] displeased her reading public, who felt that they compromised the detective narrative” (Miskimmin 443). As a counteraction, she wrote *Five Red Herrings*, which is a clue-puzzle optima forma, but certainly not her best work. Sayers seems to have acknowledged that herself, and she continued to implement more literary elements in her fiction, which eventually culminated in the novel *Gaudy Night*. This book, like *Strong Poison*, has been hailed by readers as diverting from the genre of the detective story, and Howard Haycraft has written that even though Sayers was a fine detective novelist, at the end of her detection years, she “intruded unwittingly on the dangerous no-man’s-land which is neither good detection nor good legitimate fiction” (qtd. in Kenney 275). Haycraft may be right to the point that her later novels were no longer classic detective stories, but that does not mean that they are not good fiction.

It is in *Gaudy Night* that Dorothy L. Sayers vents her frustrations around the turmoil she has been feeling inside for some years now, namely the conflict of losing faith in one’s own work. Harriet Vane, who is, rather than Peter Wimsey, the main character of this novel, struggles throughout the book with her latest detective story, *Death ‘twixt Wind and Water*. The title itself already suggests a situation that is not clear, but hovers between several options

(Miskimmin 447). Harriet has so far been successful with her usual style of writing, but she feels resentment when it comes to her latest story, and especially towards the protagonist Wilfrid, also dubbed “the world’s worst goop” (*Gaudy Night* 367). It is not just her new achievement which displeases her. When she has to revise three older works of her own hand, she, after reading them “felt thoroughly jaded and displeased with herself. The books were alright, as far as they went; as intellectual exercises, they were even brilliant. But there was something lacking about them” (75). This lack of something is that same lack that Dorothy L. Sayers herself increasingly felt. For both women, the bare construction of the clue-puzzle is no longer enough. They feel the need for a more emotional and human approach. It is Peter Wimsey who points out to Harriet the right path for her new novel. Harriet does not see how she can alter the character of Wilfrid, as Wimsey suggests, without having to abandon the book she is writing and to start all over again. To this, he replies: “You would have to abandon the jig-saw kind of story and write a book about human beings for a change” (368). Catherine Kenney remarks that Peter and Harriet’s discussion of how to rearrange her latest novel is, “in a sense, two sides of their creator’s mind debating on a topic of crucial importance for her” (51).

Whereas for Sayers the conflict lies in the fact that she wanted to write a more literary sort of detective story against generic conventions and expectations from her audience, the basis for Harriet’s struggle is her own emotions. When Wimsey suggests that she should be focusing on human beings, she answers him: “I’m afraid to try that, Peter. It might go too near the bone” (367). Ever since the debacle of her affair with Philip Boyes, his death and the subsequent murder trial in *Strong Poison*, Harriet has been reluctant to deal with her feelings and emotions, in order to avoid being hurt again. This is also one of the reasons for her constant refusal of the continuous stream of marriage proposals from Wimsey. By writing detective fiction that is solely focused on the intellect, Harriet can avoid being involved in

anything that is bordering on her emotional life. It is not until her return to Oxford that she is not only forced to confront her own feelings, but also gets a look in the lives of other women and the choices they have made. That Harriet is not looking forward to face her feelings is evidenced by her comment on Wimsey's suggestion regarding her book: "'It might be the wisest thing to do.' 'Write it out and get rid of it?' 'Yes.' 'I'll think about that. It would hurt like hell'" (368).

Harriet's struggle to combine the jig-saw puzzle with emotions is a metaphor for the second conflict found in this novel, namely that of whether one must choose between one's head and one's heart. On the level of *Death 'twixt Wind and Water*, it is jig-saw (head) versus emotions (heart). On a higher level, it is Harriet's fight of whether she can consent to be Peter's wife and follow her heart, or whether this would leave her feeling deprived of the independence she has gained through her job as a writer. This struggle can be considered at two other levels, that is to say on the level of the case of the poison-pen, and the case of the community of educated women versus those women who are married, have children and run a household. When Harriet returns to Oxford for the celebration of a Gaudy Night, she comes across different types of women. There is Phoebe Tucker, an old school friend, who seems to have combined the best of both worlds: she is married and has children, but at the same time she travels with her husband to archaeological sites for excavations. Then there is the latest addition to the staff of Shrewsbury, a scholar named Miss de Vine. This woman, according to Harriet, "was a fighter, indeed; but one to whom the quadrangle of Shrewsbury was a native and proper arena; a soldier knowing no personal loyalties, whose sole allegiance was to the fact" (21). Throughout the novel, Miss de Vine continually represents the scholarly side of Harriet's struggle. A third woman Harriet encounters at the Gaudy is Catherine Freemantle, now Mrs. Bendick. She, while at Oxford, had been "[v]ery brilliant, very smart, very lively and the outstanding scholar of her year" (52). As it turns out, Mrs. Bendick has married a

farmer and has ever since lived a rather hard life working the country and taking care of husband and children. Upon hearing this, Harriet contemplates: “What damned waste! [...] All that brilliance, all that trained intelligence, harnessed to a load that any uneducated country girl could have drawn, far better” (53). Though Mrs. Bendick has some nostalgic feelings for the Oxford days, she stands by her husband and the work she does. To Harriet, this conversation makes her even more prone against marriage. If such a brilliant scholar as Mrs. Bendick can turn out like this, what will happen to her? She does acknowledge that what Peter Wimsey offers her is a far cry from the life of Mrs. Bendick, who tells her that “one’s rather apt to marry into someone else’s job” (55). Harriet knows this to be true, but at the same time she “was offered the opportunity of marrying into a job as near as her own as made no great difference” (55). Even so, after her return from her first trip to Oxford, Harriet is convinced that there is no way there can “ever be any alliance between the intellect and the flesh” (507). This is evident when she observes the doors of the student rooms at Shrewsbury: “so many unknown quantities. So many destined wives and mothers of the race: or, alternatively, so many potential historians, scientists, school-teachers, doctors, lawyers; as you liked to think one thing of more importance than the other” (127). Harriet is convinced that the state of things is an either/or situation, and that an and/and situation is not to be achieved.

The struggle of combining head and heart is not merely confined to Harriet Vane. It had been an emerging problem for those women in the 1920s and 1930s that were educated and wanted to act upon their education, or those who sought more in life than marriage. Sayers’ novel, and indeed she herself, have been praised by feminists because of its treatment of the “women’s question” (Kenney 156). The novel can very well be read as a pro-feminist statement: the modern educated women at Shrewsbury have achieved a more or less similar status as male scholars; they live an independent scholarly life; and they do not allow any

personal circumstances to tamper with their intellectual assessments. Sayers did not equate herself with those feminists that regarded her books as a work of feminism. As a matter of fact, she was annoyed by the whole notion of women supposedly existing as a separate class in society. She argued:

[W]hat is unreasonable and irritating is to assume that *all* one's tastes and preferences have to be conditioned by the class to which one belongs. That has been the very common error into which men have frequently fallen about women – and it is the error into which feminist women are, perhaps, a little inclined to fall into about themselves. (qtd. in Kenney 124; original italics)

Sayers believed that both men and women should be regarded as human beings, and that they are equals in that sense (Kenney 124). Her thoughts about equality are also present in her comments about occupation. The point she pressed was that people ought to do those jobs that they are supposed to do, whether it is men's work or women's work. As long as each person does that job that is his or hers, they are working for the better of society and themselves, because "a human being *must* have an occupation, if he or she is not to become a nuisance to the world" (qtd. in Savage 163; original italics). She has included the same line of thought in *Gaudy Night*, when Harriet tells Mrs. Bendick: "I'm sure one should do one's own job, however trivial" (55). This whole business about women not being a separate class but human beings Sayers also used in her argument on the allowance of women into universities. To those men who were complaining about why women would want to be classically educated, she replied:

The answer is NOT that *all* women would be the better for knowing about Aristotle... but simply: "What women want as a class is irrelevant. *I* want to know about Aristotle. It is true that most women care nothing about him, and a great many male undergraduates turn pale and faint at the thought of him—but I, eccentric individual



that I am, do want to know about Aristotle, and I submit that there is nothing in my shape or bodily functions which need prevent my knowing about him.” (qtd. in Savage 162; original italics and capitals)

As sound as her arguments might be, certain people, and men especially, were still adverse to women intruding the formerly male kingdoms of Oxford and Cambridge. *Gaudy Night* was written almost two decades after women had gained full membership of Oxford, and yet not all men were reconciled with the idea. Harriet is piqued when she discovers an article in a newspaper talking in a demeaning manner of “undergraduettes” and a “lady head” of college (83). Miss Hillyard, the History teacher and a woman quite adverse to men, tells Harriet that, in her opinion, though the men might have let women in, they still do not consider them as equals (62). It might be that society’s criticism is one of the reasons why Harriet fights Peter. Even though it becomes clear throughout the novel, and also in the previous two books, that Peter values her, not despite but because of her intelligence, the fact that Harriet feels this disapproval from the outside world makes her cling all the more anxiously to the independence of her occupation. The Dean of Shrewsbury tells Harriet, and she might be quite right in saying so: “I think it’s perfectly noble of them to let us come trampling over their University at all, bless their hearts. They’ve been used to being lords and masters for hundreds of years and they want a bit of time to get used to the change” (64). However hard it may have been for the women in those days, it is not to be expected that society’s ideas that had been pointing in one direction for centuries would be changed overnight. It should be said that certainly not all men were antagonistic towards female scholars. Many men were pretty much content with the idea, Peter Wimsey of course being one of them. It is by the way only very well that Peter does approve of educated women, or Harriet would have definitely chucked him two novels ago.

Not only men were inimical towards female scholars. Quite a number of women were, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, considering the changes in society, opposed to the idea of women attending university. It has been said that women are each other's worst enemy, and this is definitely the case in *Gaudy Night*. Harriet is called back to Oxford because Shrewsbury is plagued by an anonymous poison-pen. This troublemaker appears to bear a grudge against educated women. Harriet quickly deduces that the poison-pen must be a woman connected to Shrewsbury, and this discovery sets in motion a quest for this malicious woman before somebody gets hurt. The poison-pen sends out letters, some of them blaming the scholars for their education, and some of them accusing educated women of making men miserable, as well as undertaking other kinds of unsound actions. After many incidents, of which two almost end fatally, it turns out that the anonymous mischief-maker is one of the scouts of the college. Annie Wilson is an impoverished widow who saw her husband do away with himself after being caught and punished for academic fraud. The one who discovered the deceit and reported it chances to be Miss de Vine. After her husband's death, Annie took up the job as a scout at Shrewsbury after finding out that Miss de Vine was set to work there. Her initial grudge was against the scholar, but she quickly expanded this to the rest of the women, all the while wanting to make sure that these unnatural females would leave men alone. Annie lives according to the motto that a "woman's job is to look after a husband and children" (539). She also believes that unmarried women who are being educated at a university and live together is an unnatural thing (141). This is also indicated when Harriet asks a daughter of Annie what she wants to be when she grows up and the child answers: "I'm going to have a motorcycle and keep a garage" (272). Annie is horrified hearing this, since such jobs are men's jobs, and they are hard up for work already. Plus, no man will possibly marry a girl if she owns a motorcycle. When the scout is at last discovered by Peter Wimsey to be the culprit, she makes a vile speech in front of the Senior Common Room of Shrewsbury,

blaming each and every scholar present for “[taking] the work away from the men and break their hearts and lives” (540). She also blames Harriet for toying with Peter and being too conceited to marry Philip Boyes, in the act of which she is supposed to be responsible for his death.

This clash between Annie and the S.C.R. is a representation of the conflict that Harriet is struggling with inside. She is trapped between two opposing forces, namely those that deem that a woman can have an education and a job, and those that deem this unnatural. The latter group is the reason the staff of Shrewsbury wants to keep things quiet concerning the case of the poison-pen. Certain people in society firmly believed that being a female scholar, which, in effect, often meant that these women did not marry and thus were deprived of any sexual experience, made them crazy in some sense. People were apt to invent certain sobriquets for female scholars: “‘Soured virginity’ – ‘unnatural life’ – ‘semi-demented spinsters’ – ‘starved appetites and suppressed impulses’ – ‘unwholesome atmosphere’ – she could think of whole sets of epithets, ready minted for circulation” (88). Though the poison-pen is stopped in her tracks, she has achieved at least one thing: the scholars have begun to doubt themselves during her ongoing campaign, and Harriet is among them. She starts to feel frightened at the prospect of being walled in with so many potential crazy women and she goes as far as thinking to herself: “Somebody’s potty, anyhow... that seems to be what happens to one if one keeps out of the way of love and marriage and all the rest of the muddle” (436). What Sayers is exploring in her novel is “not the crazed maladjustment of women who work, who achieve, who do not marry, but rather the fear in the minds of even these women that such maladjustment must inevitably underlie female success” (Edwards 34), thereby demonstrating that even educated women were not completely free of the prejudices against them that still lingered in society (and would keep on lingering for a long time). The Dean of Shrewsbury admits to not being free of similar ideas herself: “I suppose it might even be one of ourselves.

That's what's so horrible. Yes, I know – elderly virgins, and all that” (90). The reason Harriet cannot solve the case without the help of Peter Wimsey is because she does not know where she stands in life: on the side of society or on the side of Oxford. Her “own anxieties about her life as a single professional woman” (Humble 229) force her at some point to side with those people in society who believe that female scholars suffer under sexual repression and will go potty unless they marry.

Fortunately, the perpetrator turns out not to be a scholar, as was feared, but a woman who has very rigorous ideas about a woman's natural job. It is quite symbolic that Annie has adopted the job of scout. Scouts are domestic helps at Oxford, which suits in nicely with the ideas Annie has about ‘normal’ women. As it happens to be, “her villainy is tied directly to her ‘normal’ beliefs that no woman has the right to take a job from any man and that love means abandoning the capacity to judge” (Edwards 34). By creating a villain who is fit for a lunatic asylum, Sayers efficiently shows how wrong Annie's ideas, and consequently those of society are. Indeed, the way that the scholars handle Annie is not to send her “to a jury, but to a doctor” (Edwards 34).

Having resolved the case of the poison-pen, Harriet finds herself once again facing the question of whether she has to choose between head and heart, or whether there is the possibility of having both. At the beginning of the story, she thought that she would find safety within the walls of Shrewsbury, where she actually *is* somebody: “They can't take this away, at any rate. Whatever I may have done since, this remains. Scholar; Master of Arts; Domina; Senior Member of this University [...] a place achieved, inalienable; worthy of reference” (10). In the mean time however, she has been conflicted between the academic and intellectual life of Shrewsbury, and the outside world, filled with emotions and uncertainties. This is especially clear when Peter Wimsey enters the scene. On the one hand does he represent the world outside: “For good or evil, she had called in something explosive from the

outside world to break up the ordered tranquillity of the place; she had sold the breach to an alien force; she had sided with London against Oxford and with the world against the cloister” (337). At the same time he is an undeniable link to Oxford, having studied at Oxford himself: “He came into the quiet room as though he belonged there, and had never belonged to any other place” (337). Harriet begins to realise more and more that Peter Wimsey might be the only man with whom she can actually establish the highly doubted compromise between head and heart. This is made clear at several points during the story, for instance when he does not ask her to step back from the poison-pen case, but merely tells her that she is in charge of her own life and her own choices. Harriet’s reaction to such a statement of trust is incredulity: “That was an admission of equality, and she had not expected it of him. If he conceived of marriage along those lines, then the whole problem would have to be reviewed in that new light; but that seemed scarcely possible. To take such a line and stick to it, he would have to be, not a man but a miracle” (262). Towards the end of the novel, Harriet has quite a good grasp of her feelings for Peter, but she is still afraid of giving in to him. It is eventually a discussion with Miss de Vine, the woman who throughout the novel has been the representation of Harriet’s rational side in the head versus heart conflict, who convinces her that Peter is indeed the ideal match for her. The novel ends with a true union between head and heart: the act of accepting the marriage proposal is in Latin: ““*Placetne, magistra?*” ‘*Placet*’ (557; italics in original).

## Conclusion

This paper has focused on conflicts in the lives of Dorothy L. Sayers, Harriet Vane and educated women of the Interwar Period. By using Harriet as a mannequin, Sayers has vented both her own frustrations regarding her work as well as the feelings of dissatisfaction, turmoil and uneasiness that were felt by women during the Interwar period. It was not easy

for Sayers to change the way she wrote and at the same time to satisfy her audience. Whether she has succeeded or not is up to the reader to decide. Her treatment of the changed position of women in society shows both the choices they could make and the limitations that went with them. Sayers has created a compromise that works for Harriet, but there were many women in the 1920s and 1930s who were less fortunate. Taking all this into account, one readily discovers that Golden Age detective stories are occupied with detection, but that it is not always a murder that needs to be investigated.

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