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Sayers' Life and Work

DOROTHY L. SAYERS WAS a child of the vicarage. Her father, the Rev. Henry Sayers was headmaster of the choir school for Christ Church when she was born, when she was four years old, he accepted the living of Bluntisham-cum-Earith in Cambridgeshire. Her parents taught her at home and gave her a broader preparation than that typical for a girl intended for society and then marriage, perhaps the result of Henry Sayers' talents as schoolmaster and enlightened outlook on female education. Her father developed her gifts, musical and intellectual. He taught her the violin and started her on Latin when she was six. She had French and German governesses. She remarked to Norah Lambourne while they were making paper maché props for the first production of *The Emperor Constantine*, that she didn't do crafts at home. She remembered her father saying "That's not for you, Dorothy."¹

Her father seems not to have given her much explicit religious instruction, but Dorothy grew up with household daily prayers and attended the services in the parish church, where she became "thoroughly familiar . . . with the Book of Common Prayer, and the rich and intellectually demanding theology of Matins and Evensong and the Authorized Version of the Bible."² The language of the liturgy, especially the Athanasian Creed, made a deep impression on her that lasted all her life. In a letter to two Irish

1. Personal conversation with Norah Lambourne at the Dorothy L. Sayers' Society Convention, 2001.

2. Loades, *Feminist Theology*, 170.

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clergymen she reminisced about how much she looked forward to reciting that creed, even though she couldn't understand it, "but it was grand. So mysterious and full of rumbling great worlds, and it made such a wonderful woven pattern. And it didn't talk down to me[.]"³

She was surrounded by books and pursued her interests with great zest, and with a mind that constantly sought for connections between the content of her studies. She later recounted how excited she was to find that geometry really worked, in marking out the tennis court, or the thrill when she realized that Ahasuerus, a Bible person, was Xerxes. This connection showed her how she had two spheres: the Bible, stained glass, and history, factual and interesting. This insight informed how she conceived her task as a Christian writer.⁴

Neither Sayers or her parents were willing to have her life defined by the gender roles of her time. The Sayers raised their daughter to focus on using her talents. They hoped that she would attend one of the new colleges for women, and to that end they sent her to the Godolphin School. It is consistent with their liberality in her upbringing, and her aunt's example, that she sat for a scholarship to Somerville, the non-sectarian women's college. She succeeded in winning the Gilchrist Scholarship at Somerville College, read Modern Languages with Mildred Pope and took a First in her examinations in 1915.

At Somerville she and several kindred spirits, Dorothy Rowe, Amphillis Middlemore, Margaret Chub and Claris Frankenberg, arranged weekly meetings to read aloud their literary efforts. Their name, bestowed by Sayers, was The Mutual Admiration Society (MAS), since that is what college would have called them anyway. Her interest in Christianity and Christian themes was reflected in her writing for the Society. Claris Frankenberg remembered that Dorothy Sayers read a conversation between the three Magi. A short story from the group's magazine of 1917, "Who Calls the Tune?" attempts to portray what happens when a man dies and faces judgment.

Her letters from Oxford show a normal young woman enjoying friendships with men and women and comfortable with following fashion, "On Friday Aunt Maud took me to Elliston's to choose the evening cloak . . . I have made myself the most ravishing little cap to wear in New College chapel—on the model of the one Gladys sent me. It is executed in black

3. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 2*, 154.

4. See Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 30, for the account of marking out the tennis court, and Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 24, for the Ahasuerus reference.

ribbon and net, and is so becoming, the Bursar thinks it is quite unsuitable for a place of worship!"⁵ She attended church services regularly, and was reading the Gospel. A letter to her parents foreshadows her work on *The Man Born to Be King*, "Having read the two Gospels with more attention than I had ever before given to the subject, I came to the conclusion that such a set of stupid, literal, pig-headed people never existed as Christ had to do with, including the disciples."⁶ She wrote to her parents about her spiritual journey:

It isn't a case of "here is the Christian religion, the one authoritative and respectable rule of life. Take it or leave it". It's "here's a muddling kind of affair called Life, and here are nineteen or twenty different explanations of it, all supported by people whose opinions are not to be sneezed at. Among them is the Christian religion in which you happen to have been brought up. Your friend so-and-so has been brought up in quite a different way of thinking; is a perfectly splendid person and thoroughly happy. What are you going to do about it?"—I'm worrying it out quietly, and whatever I get hold of will be valuable because I've got it for myself.⁷

Her intellectual interest in Christianity continued, and G. K. Chesterton was an influence. She reported buying his *What's Wrong with the World*, a book she recommended to her parents.⁸ She commented to a friend that the Christian Union is all wrong, "Christianity rests on Faith, not Faith on Christianity. If you have read *Orthodoxy* you will see what I mean."⁹ In May and again in June of 1914 she heard Chesterton speak and was most impressed with his wit and manner, which was not as aggressive as his prose would lead one to believe. On Chesterton's death in 1936, she wrote in a letter of condolence to Mrs. Chesterton, "I think, in some ways, G. K.'s books have become more a part of my mental make-up than those of any writer you could name."¹⁰

She was thoroughly happy at Oxford, with an active social life and a satisfying intellectual life. She wanted a life which would include a satisfying personal life and the kind of literary work that had made her time there

5. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 1*, 86.

6. *Ibid.*, 71.

7. *Ibid.*, 85.

8. *Ibid.*, 71.

9. *Ibid.*, 72.

10. *Ibid.*, 394.

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so happy. Initially, she taught in a girls' school in Hull, which she found unsatisfying. She returned to Oxford to work for Basil Blackwell, her father paying Blackwell £100 per annum for having Sayers as an apprentice. While she was learning the publishing trade she published two volumes of poetry, *Op I* (1916) and *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (1918). These volumes expressed her faith in ways that reviewers found new and refreshing, and one of the poems, "When All the Saints" was set to music by Henry Ley, then organist at Christ Church.¹¹

During this period she had a number of difficulties with social relationships which she made light of in her letters home, but provoked her to write an essay "Eros in Academe" which appeared in 1919 in *The Oxford Outlook*. This lamented that educated women in her time no longer have the social skills that the educated women of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance had. She placed much of the blame on the patterning of female education upon that of men's education. She pointed out that women mature earlier; a man leaves university, "still a lad, and can go and find knowledge where and how he pleases; the girl when she goes down is already a woman and if she is still socially ignorant it is late for her to begin learning. . . . They [women] cannot grow wise in an atmosphere in which going to tea with a youth ranks as a thrilling dissipation."¹²

Sayers was never prepared to accept the safety of marriage if the marriage she was offered was not a passionate, equal partnership. While at Blackwell's, she had acquired a serious admirer in the Rev. Leonard Hodgson, later Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford, but she found his devotion distasteful.¹³ She fell in love with Eric Whelpton, an ex-officer who was trying to finish his degree, and seems to have been more attracted to him than he to her. When he decided to move to France to run an agency for exchange students, Dorothy followed him as his secretary. At this time she was devouring the Sexton Blake books with an eye to supporting herself by writing detective stories. Whelpton was critical of this ambition. Nevertheless she continued reading and trying to write them. When he moved back to London and ended their relationship, she, too, returned to London.

She was writing her first detective novel and tried supply teaching, coaching and translating to tide her over while she tried to find a publisher. She realised she was a drain on her parents, but wanted to be independent

11. *Ibid.*, 145–46.

12. Sayers, "Eros," 114–15.

13. Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers*, 96–97.

and not return to live in the vicarage, a surplus woman like her aunts. When in London she lamented to her parents, "I can't get the work I want, not the money I want, nor (consequently) the clothes I want, nor the holiday I want, nor the man I want!"¹⁴ I think it is significant that she wanted both the work and the man, but the work came first in the litany. In 1922 she was taken on as a copywriter at S. H. Benson's Advertising Agency, and found professional and financial stability, writing advertising copy in the day and detective novels in the evening. *Whose Body?*, her first detective novel, came out in 1923. It featured her hero, Lord Peter Wimsey, who is discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Sayers' time at Bensons coincided with the beginning of the modern agency system as we know it. It was a period of remarkable growth in advertising. She worked for Oswald Greene, a director of the agency and one of its best copy writers. He believed in "reason why" copy and was famous for the campaigns Benson's created for Coleman's Mustard (The Mustard Club) and for Guinness. Sayers seems to have fit in easily from her accounts in her letters to her parents, "The office is always an amusement—I was really wonderfully lucky to get a job that suited me so well."¹⁵ Sayers was a very successful copywriter whose career at Benson's could have continued were it not for her choice to retire from advertising to write full time in 1930.

In her early years at Bensons she was involved with John Cournos, for whom she cared deeply. She had the strength of mind to refuse a sexual relationship. He wanted her to use birth control and she refused.¹⁶ When that relationship ended she took up with William White, for whom she cared very little. She had a sexual relationship with him and did use contraception but she became pregnant. She wrote to Cournos about this and explained that "the one thing worse than bearing the child of a man you hate would be being condemned to be childless by the man you loved. . . . when I see men callously and cheerfully denying women the full use of their bodies, while insisting with sobs and howls on the satisfaction of their own, I simply can't find it heroic or kind, or anything but pretty rotten and feeble."¹⁷ She took a six week break from Bensons to have the baby, her son John Anthony, and complete her second mystery novel, *Clouds of Witness*

14. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 1*, 178.

15. *Ibid.*, 197.

16. See Reynolds, *Sayers*, ch. 7 and Brabazon, *Sayers*, ch. 9.

17. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 1*, 217.

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(1926). It was a period of great stress, yet she continued to work as a copy-writer and a mystery writer, and the work provided not only the financial support but also a relief to the emotional storms of her love for and rejection by Cournos. She placed her son with her cousin Ivy Shrimpton who fostered children professionally, and determined to keep his existence a secret from her parents and more particularly from her maiden aunts.

In 1926 she married Oswald Arthur Fleming, "Mac," a divorced veteran of World War I. She hoped that eventually she would be able to bring her son to live with them, a hope that was never realised. *Unnatural Death* (1927) and *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club* (1928) appeared adding to her reputation as a mystery writer. Her translation of *Tristan in Brittany*, begun while she was studying with Mildred Pope, was published in 1929.

On 20th September 1928 her father died, aged seventy-four. He had lived to see the beginnings of her success. Mac helped Mrs. Sayers sort out the rectory while Dorothy returned to work. Mac found a house in Witham, Essex, which became the home for Mrs. Sayers and Aunt Mabel. In June 1929, Mrs. Sayers died. By 1930 Sayers had achieved enough success as a mystery novelist to give up her job at Bensons. She and Mac moved to the house in Witham, with Aunt Mabel, although they kept the flat in Bloomsbury. She supported herself, Mac, John Anthony and Aunt Mabel with her writing. Her marriage, initially at least, must have been emotionally and physically satisfying for her according to her biographers.¹⁸ The later years were difficult; Mac resented her success even though she was supporting them. During the Witham years, her private life was hidden from public view. She wanted people to look at her work and not at her personal life: the work she produced was important, not the personal or psychological details of her own existence.

In the early 1930s she published more novels featuring Wimsey: *Strong Poison* (1930), *The Five Red Herrings* (1931), *Have His Carcase* (1932) *Murder Must Advertise* (1933), *The Nine Tailors* (1934) *Gaudy Night* (1935), and *Busman's Honeymoon* (the play in 1936, the novel in 1937).

In addition to the Wimsey novels, in 1930 she wrote *The Documents in the Case* in collaboration with Robert Eustace, an epistolary novel without a central character who is the detective; that is left to the reader. She also released collections of short stories, *Lord Peter Views the Body*, (1928), *Hangman's Holiday* (1933) and *In the Teeth of the Evidence* (1939). She

18. Brabazon describes the early years of their marriage as "a time of pride and happiness." Brabazon, *Sayers*, 134.

edited three volumes of *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1928, 1931 and 1934); her introductions are considered classics in literary criticism of the genre. She reviewed mysteries for *The Sunday Times* from June 1933 until August 1935. She helped found the Detection Club and took part in the joint novels the members wrote to finance the Club.

In the mid-1930s Sayers began working in the theatre, which gave her a respite from her difficult domestic situation, and a working life which she found exhilarating. She found herself in a new world, as Barbara Reynolds relates: “‘There was I,’ she once said to me, talking about this period of her life, ‘stiff in my ways with strangers, suddenly plunged among people who called each other “darling” at first sight and immediately embraced without the slightest embarrassment.’ She loved it and responded warmly.”¹⁹ Her first play was *Busman's Honeymoon*.

Before her play *Busman's Honeymoon* opened in London, Miss Babington of the Canterbury Festival committee wrote to Sayers asking her to do a play for the festival, at the suggestion, it is thought, of Charles Williams, who had written the play for the 1936 Festival.²⁰ Sayers initially refused, but changed her mind when she learned that the 1937 festival was to have the theme of Arts and Crafts. She wrote *The Zeal of Thy House* which opened in June 1937. The play gives the first statement of her analogy to the Trinity. This speech was cut from the performance but restored in the printed version of the play. It was read by Father Herbert Hamilton Kelly who wrote to Sayers asking, “I wonder if you recognize, or are interested in recognizing, how closely your book images the principles of the Athanasian Creed—the two-fold necessity of faith in the Trinity of God, and the Incarnation.”²¹ This inspired a correspondence which becomes the substance for Sayers' articles in the press on Christianity as well as *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), Sayers' major work of Trinitarian theology which is discussed in chapter 4.

The play moved to the West End after the short run in Canterbury. Sayers' talent for publicity and her desire to attract a general audience to the play led her to give press interviews in which she opined that the play was about Christian dogma. This was a startling statement. *The Sunday Times* commissioned an article to explain it. Sayers became an apologist for Christianity. Her work in this area is detailed in chapter 3.

19. Reynolds, *Sayers*, 302.

20. *Ibid.*, 310.

21. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 2*, 42.

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In “The Greatest Drama,” the article for *The Sunday Times*, she made clear why the creeds’ insistence of Jesus being fully man and fully God mattered:

So that is the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the under-dog and got beaten, when He submitted to the conditions He had laid down and became a man like the men He had made, and the men He had made broke Him and killed Him. . . . So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

“*And the third day He rose again*”; . . . One thing is certain: if He was God and nothing else, His immortality means nothing to us; if He was man and no more, His death is no more important to us than yours or mine. But if He really was both God and man, then when the man Jesus died, God died too, and when the God Jesus rose from the dead, man rose too, because they were one and the same person.²²

In all her articles she saw herself not as being original but as using her skill as a craftsman in words to clarify the dogma of the Church. This dogma was an explanation of the universe that the public was free to accept or reject; her job was to make sure they understood exactly what they were usually rejecting without thought. The central dogma she defended was the Incarnation, that Christ was truly man and truly God. She later wrote, “It is only with the confident assertion of the creative divinity of the Son that the doctrine of the Incarnation becomes a real revelation of the structure of the world.”²³

The articles attracted the notice of Rev. F. A. Iremonger, then head of the BBC’s religion department. He commissioned a nativity play from her which gave her an even wider audience. She wrote *He That Should Come*, a realistic play set in a bustling inn which used modern language. This is the first venture she made into treating the Gospels with the vividness and reality she had used in her apologetic writing. By not using the words of the Authorized Version she caused great offence. She publicised the play with an article in *Radio Times* with no apology for her use of modern language: “Give such a story actuality, and the result may appear startling, perhaps dangerous, possibly even blasphemous.”²⁴ The play provoked a great

22. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

23. Sayers, *Creed*, 38.

24. Sayers, “Nativity Play,” 13.

response; Reynolds writes that the response “gave Dorothy a new view of herself and of her role as a writer. She experienced an increase in confidence and a surge of creative power.”²⁵

The theme of personal responsibility is central to Sayers' wartime writing. Her publisher, Victor Gollancz asked her to write a Christmas message to the nation. Instead of yet another Nativity meditation, or an uplifting pamphlet, which is probably what he had in mind, she responded with a book *Begin Here* (1939). She was asked to write another play for the Canterbury Festival and re-worked the Faust theme in *The Devil to Pay*. She had written a light-hearted play, *Love All*, in 1938 on the question of men and women and work. It had a short run in 1940 and received good reviews.

Sayers' spent the war giving speeches, usually on vocation in work, talks to the armed forces, broadcasting for the BBC, writing books, newspaper and magazine articles on a variety of topics, but mostly on the importance of personal responsibility and integrity in work. Her two outstanding achievements in theology were the play cycle, *The Man Born to be King*, (1941–1943) and the book *The Mind of the Maker* (1941). *The Man Born to be King* is written as a twelve-play series and can be read as a work of narrative theology. Before she had the opportunity to write the radio plays, she had written that “I believe one could find no better road to a realistic theology than that of coaching an intelligent actor to play the Leading Part [Christ] in the world's drama.”²⁶ When the essay was published in the collection in 1947 she noted that she had been given that opportunity and “the reception given to *The Man Born to Be King* showed, I think, that the public thought it well worth trying.”²⁷

The Mind of the Maker summarizes her insights about work and bases them on an analogy to the Trinity in the work of the creative artist. This, however, was only a small part of the work she undertook in the following years. Her religious theatrical work led to her commissions for speeches on Christianity, work which demanded more and more of her time through the war years. She found the trips away from Witham a relief. The war years were some of the busiest in Sayers' life, and her writings and speeches of this period will be detailed in chapter 4.

Her Christian faith sustained her through her life, and found expression in all her works, the novels and plays as well as in the explicitly

25. Reynolds, *Sayers*, 327.

26. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 21.

27. *Ibid.*, 23.

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religious work. Though she was a public apologist for Christianity, Sayers was not an active churchwoman. She became friends with Fr. Patrick McLaughlin, a priest she knew through the Catholic Writers Guild. When Fr. McLaughlin and Fr. Gilbert Shaw founded their mission to intellectuals at St Anne's, Soho, Sayers helped by speaking, writing, and, in November 1944, becoming part of the Advisory Council, and eventually its chairman. She struggled to keep St Anne's alive and efficient. James Brabazon, her official biographer first saw and heard her at the mission at St Anne's in 1943. He writes: "There is little doubt that, but for her efforts, combined with the weight that her name still carried in the upper echelons of the Church of England, the St. Anne's experiment would have perished much sooner than it actually did."²⁸

St Anne's was the only Church organisation in which Sayers took a sustained active role. She was not part of Dr. Oldham's Moot in Cambridge, or, despite some mistaken reports, of the Inklings. She worked on her writing in Witham, and maintained her professional relationships primarily by letter. Meetings with others, such as her producers, were arranged at the London flat when she was in town.

She read Charles Williams' *The Figure of Beatrice* when it appeared in August of 1943 and it inspired her to pick up her copy of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (which she thought had belonged to her grandmother) for reading when a doodlebug raid meant she had to retreat to the air-raid shelter. This was a road-to-Damascus experience; her entire life changed. From that point, 1944, until her death, the majority of her time and energy were focussed on her translation of *The Divine Comedy*. She wrote to the Bishop of St Alban that she found translation a good job for difficult days, "because I can take it away, a terzain at a time, and mull it over while I peel the potatoes or get on with the cooking. My husband always enjoys telling people how he came into the kitchen one evening and found me 'reciting Dante to the duck'."²⁹ Mac was so difficult at times that she was forced to write late at night. Mac's health continued to deteriorate; he died in June, 1950. Sayers continued in the Witham house until her death in 1957.

From 1944 until her death in 1957 she worked on her translations of *The Divine Comedy*: *Hell* appeared in 1948, *Purgatory* in 1949, and *Paradise*, which was completed by Barbara Reynolds, in 1962. As a break from Dante, she translated *The Song of Roland* which appeared in 1956. In her

28. Brabazon, *Sayers*, 242.

29. Sayers, *Letters Vol. 3*, 406.

translation of *The Divine Comedy*, particularly in the introductions and notes, she demonstrated her ability to make a classic available to a public who is literate but not educated.

She was commissioned for two further religious plays, *The Just Vengeance*, 1946, and *The Emperor Constantine*, 1951. *The Just Vengeance*, which Sayers considered her finest work, was commissioned for Litchfield Cathedral Festival. It shows the influence of Sayers' work on Dante, and once again returns to the figure of Christ, and what human beings make of him, how we try to make him in our image. The final scenes of the play have the Persona Dei (the Lord Chancellor still did not allow Christ to appear on stage), in procession with the line, "He who carries the Cross, the Cross shall carry him."³⁰ *The Emperor Constantine* was written for the Colchester Festival, and is notable for a scene set at the Council of Nicea where the bishops are debating the nature of Christ. In both works, Sayers' mature thought as a Christian is displayed. The dramas deal with the theology of the atonement, and only indirectly with vocation in work.

The translation of Dante and her lecturing at the Summer School of Italian resulted in two volumes: *Introductory Papers on Dante* (1954) and *Further Papers on Dante* (1957), as well as a posthumous work of collected writings *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (1963). The works in these volumes which cover technical matters of translation and those which focus solely on literary criticism generally stand outside the scope of this study. The more philosophical papers which show her deep understanding of language, are relevant to judging her as a theologian and ethicist whose method was translation.

The two major events in her personal life, her son and her marriage, along with the unhappy experiences with Whelpton and Cournos give a quality to her writing that may be characterised as generosity. She knew she was a sinner by all her Church taught, and remained faithful. She never confused Christianity with respectability. In her detective novels she treats the realities of unplanned pregnancies, sexual desire and marital discontent with realism and a clear-eyed charity. Human lives are this messy and problematic. She neither forgot nor ignored the importance of erotic love; but she never exalted it into the primary concern in life. From her university days, she was aware of problems of educated women trying to relate to men. In "Eros in Academe" she laments the attitudes she found in her day, "We may hymn the flesh in attitudinising raptures in a public debate, but

30. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 344.

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the one thing we must not—the one thing we seemingly cannot—do is to be cheerful and take it for granted.”³¹ It was an insight which speaks of the power of *eros* in life and in art; and one which has echoes throughout her writing. In her first religious play, *The Zeal of thy House*, the protagonist is a man of sensual habits conducting an illicit affair with the Lady Ursula. He is condemned not for his Lust, though that is recognized as a sin, but for his Pride in his craftsmanship. It is his work, however, that stands to his credit with God.

Sayers own life was described by her official biographer, Brabazon, as convincing her that “no trust could be placed in personal matters; that the only salvation came through work, through craftsmanship, through the creations of mind and of hand and through intellectual passion that controlled those creations.”³² This is a revealing quote for it displays Sayers’ rejection of and Brabazon’s attachment to the conventional woman’s narrative in which only the personal provides meaning in life, and other work or interests are at best a compensation for lack of success in the personal sphere. Throughout Brabazon’s biography he places Sayers’ professional achievements as compensations for her failures in her love life. Although Sayers was unhappy in love, and did find professional life more rewarding, she perceived herself as failing in love because she didn’t care enough about personal relationships.

Carolyn Heilbrun in *Writing a Woman’s Life* has a different view of Sayers’ life, “I believe Sayers’s life to be an excellent example of a woman’s unconscious ‘fall’ into a condition where vocation is possible and out of the marriage plot that demands not only that a woman marry but that the marriage and its progeny be her life’s absolute and only center.”³³ In Sayers’ fiction the restriction of women’s concerns to their partner and the home is shown to be unhealthy, a perversion of true love. This erotic plot is too narrow for any human being to live exclusively and live well.

Sayers’ view of men, women, romance, marriage and work arises from her Christian faith and from her study of the literature of the Courts of Love. We can frame her output of novels, plays and essays with the essay “Eros in Academe” written at the beginning of her adult life in 1919 and her translation of the *Purgatory* of the Divine Comedy written towards the end of her life in 1955. In “Eros in Academe” she laments that she and her

31. Sayers, “Eros”, 111.

32. Brabazon, *Sayers*, 151.

33. Heilbrun, *Writing*, 51.

friends talk about only one subject, but lack the wise leadership of Oisille or Parlamente. Those ladies were “the pick of the country’s [Navarre’s] brains . . . well dressed, witty, courteous, shrewd and could look on a man reasonably as a human being and not as a cataclysm of nature.”³⁴ In the 1500s, women ruled the men without any political privilege; today, Sayers laments, we have political privilege, and women still rule men, but it is not the educated women who so rule. This, she says, “is bad for learning and worse for the world.”³⁵ What Sayers particularly admires in Margaret of Navarre is her combination of wisdom with her mysticism: she knew that keeping a high ethical standard required worldly wisdom. It is the innocents who can be easily duped and betrayed.

In 1929 she published her translation of *Tristan in Brittany*. In her introduction she writes that the poet, Thomas was not really interested in the dragons, giants and magical marvels, but in the psychology of love. Sayers defines his conception of the passion of love as “a kind of half-way house between the old feudal morality and new and artificial ‘amour courtois’ . . . The beloved woman is no longer a chattel; but she has not yet become a cult.”³⁶

In 1955 she described the poetic doctrine of Courtly Love in the preface to *Purgatory*, in order to explain the relationship between Beatrice and Dante. First of all, it did not represent an attitude to sex, and it did not directly determine a man’s behaviour to his wife. It was about the man’s humility before his beloved, his “Madonna”: he took orders from her. His wife and daughters took orders from him. The key for Sayers is that, “the doctrine of Courtly Love is so far realistic that it assigns all the amorous fuss and to-do, all the tormented philosophy of love, to the male” at least in theory. “It may be death to him, but to her it is a pastime.”³⁷ This is the clearest contrast to the idea of women living only for love, a sentiment Sayers calls a piece of male wishful thinking, “Lovers, husbands, children, households—these are major feminine preoccupations: but not love.”³⁸ She assigns all of the following to masculine inventiveness: the great love lyrics, the great love-tragedies, the romantic agony, the religion of beauty, the cult

34. Sayers, “Eros,” 111.

35. Ibid., 111.

36. Sayers, *Tristan*, xxx.

37. Sayers, *Purgatory*, 32–33.

38. Ibid., 33.

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of the *ewig Weibliches*, the exaltation of virginity, the worship of the dark Eros, the deification of motherhood, the Fatal Man and the Fatal Woman.³⁹

Sayers' understanding of courtly love when combined with the Christian doctrine of Incarnation yields the marriage of Wimsey and Vane: the ideal marriage of minds and hearts as equals. Before she achieved that in her novels, she explored love as it existed in her day, good and bad, in marriages as well as in irregular unions. From the first to the last novel, and in most of the short stories, Sayers contrasts the conventional with the moral. Work and vocation are either major or minor themes in every novel, interwoven with the themes of the role of women in the society and marriage; this sets Sayers apart from Agatha Christie, who is content to accept the social norms of the day as the background of her mysteries.

Sayers knew joy through her work throughout her life. As a child, her writing and the enthusiastic participation of the household in her plays alleviated her loneliness. Throughout her unhappy experiences of love and marriage, work provided sustenance, an outlet, and an escape from the pressures of the personal. She made a living as a writer and negotiated the issues of writing for money, and being true to her writer's conscience. She did not pander to audiences. She chose detective fiction because it paid, but she wrote it with the intention of writing good fiction.

Her Christian faith influenced her life and all of her writings, even though only some of them were overtly theological. The figure of Christ exercised an intellectual and imaginative hold over her, witness her second book of poems, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, her play-cycle, *The Man Born to Be King*, her apologetic writing on the Incarnation in her wartime work, and her plays *The Just Vengeance* and *The Emperor Constantine*. Because Christ was fully man and fully God, she held a sacramental view of the universe which meant that integrity in work mattered.

In *Creed or Chaos?* she noted that most people believe that for Christians matter and the body are evil; "But so long as the Church continues to teach the manhood of God and to celebrate the sacraments of the Eucharist and of marriage, no living man should dare to say that matter and the body are not sacred to her."⁴⁰ She saw the material world as "an expression and incarnation of the creative energy of God, as a book or a picture is the material expression of the creative soul of the artist."⁴¹ This is the vision

39. *Ibid.*, 33–34.

40. Sayers, *Creed*, 43.

41. *Ibid.*

that unifies her theology of work: the Incarnation which reveals matter as sacramental, that is, a sign of God; the Trinity which is a doctrine which can be partially understood by an analogy to the mind of a creative artist; and the importance of integrity in work, and secular work as the vocation of the lay Christian.

Her discernment of her own experiences and her observation of those around her gave her a depth of understanding of the evil inherent in the good we do, and that the good is never completely overcome by evil. This understanding is brought out especially in her novel *The Nine Tailors* and in her religious drama. She would bring this aspect of the created world out clearly in *The Mind of the Maker* and other works, and it informed her views on politics and international relations so that although an English patriot, she was never jingoistic. She knew that the solidarity in guilt applied to all human beings.

The Man Born to Be King and *The Mind of the Maker* are Sayers' major theological works, the first exploring Christology in a form of radio drama, a constraint that no academic theologian would attempt. *The Mind of the Maker* is closer to a work of propositional theology, but the analogy she proposes is new and illuminating. Her major concern, throughout both works, was to relate the doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity to the life of the individual particularly in his or her work. Chapter 3 provides a survey of Sayers' wartime works, which have received less attention than her novels, to demonstrate the unity and consistency of her theology and the development in it as she tested her ideas in various genres, and before various audiences in the context of a world on the brink of war, a nation standing alone against the Nazi threat, and a world coming to terms with the Holocaust and the Atom Bomb.

Her detective fiction, her first publications and still the most popular and well-known of her works, illustrate her ideas about the place of work and romance in life, and show us Sayers' moral framework which formed the basis for her later writing. Her experience writing plays made her analogy of creativity come alive. These narratives will be examined in the following chapter.