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# Virginia Woolf Miscellany

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## Dorothy L. Sayers and Virginia Woolf: Perspectives on the Woman Intellectual in the late 1930s

Widely-accepted versions of 1930s literary history that emphasize documentary and leftist politics make outliers of both Virginia Woolf and Dorothy L. Sayers, and they do so in ways that keep them far apart. Woolf's acknowledged position in Modernism and Sayers' in "golden age" detective fiction would seem to offer little opportunity for placing them in dialogue. And yet I would like to suggest a focus that brings them closer together and contributes to a more accurate picture of the 1930s literature and culture: I propose that Dorothy L. Sayers' tenth Peter Wimsey detective novel, *Gaudy Night* (1935) might be read as a sustained examination of questions pertinent to those engaged by Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* (1938). Sayers and Woolf do not need documentary or formal political allegiances; rather, in terms of our understanding of the period, they are our correspondents, reporting on the situation of the woman intellectual under pressure in the latter half of the 1930s.

David Trotter's recent study, *Literature in the First Media Age: Britain Between the Wars* (Harvard, 2013) offers a welcome approach to the period. In looking at communication technology, Trotter sharpens the focus on some embodiments of Woolf's feminism while linking her work naturally with other writers not part of the same conventional groupings, as when he refers to "Woolf's representation of telephony in *The Waves*" as a way "to tie its interest in the clan of outsiders back into the erotics of connection imagined by Hamilton, Isherwood, Lehmann, and others" (82). Of interest to Woolf scholars and other scholars of the 1930s is the way Trotter's response to the most recent generation of work on the inter-war period—such as books by Jed Esty and Rebecca L. Walkowitz—uses his communication lens to re-materialize feminism. He argues, for example, that the telephone "did provide, especially where young independent women were concerned, the basis for a viable and appealing existence. By 1930, Britain was no mere shrinking island. The interest Bowen, Woolf, and others took in such developments amounted to a good deal more than the adoption of a 'cosmopolitan style'" (27). Woolf's and Sayers's 1930s fiction makes appearances in Trotter's study (although not together), and one direction of his analysis, as I have tried to illustrate briefly, is sympathetic to my proposed means of bringing them together through the focal point of the role of the woman intellectual under the pressure of the late 1930s. This was a time when Woolf's argument in *Three Guineas* about the centrality of women's rights to any discussion of supposedly larger political or economic issues could be met by embarrassment, resistance, or silence. Uncomprehending responses are well-documented into the following generation: Quentin Bell was not alone in finding Fascism a "far more agonizing and immediate question" than women's rights (Lee 680), and Julia Briggs traces its reception similarly, from the silence of Woolf's friends and the Queenie Leavis attacks to "second generation" hostility (332-37). If women's rights in general seemed less valid as a subject of concern in the latter half of the 1930s, even more invalid would be specific questions concerning the woman scholar, the women's colleges, and the role of women intellectuals. And yet both Sayers and Woolf held their course in the middle of the 1930s.

How might we proceed to bring Woolf and Sayers together in this particular context? Following Woolf's own practice, we turn first to biography. While the different life patterns of the two writers are evident, Woolf scholars are well aware of the overlapping social and intellectual circles of the period in which nearly everyone turns out to be connected to everyone else, and Woolf and Sayers are both educated men's daughters of a similar generation (born in 1882 and 1893, respectively). Given the voluminous documentation provided by Woolf's published diaries, letters, and subsequent biographies, it seems not unreasonable to turn confidently to the indices of those volumes. Finding them surprisingly silent, lacking any reference to Sayers, we turn then to the multiple biographies of Sayers, calculating that perhaps the popular writer noticed her more literary sister even if the reverse did not happen. Again, nothing. A passing trace is found in Carolyn Heilbrun's biographical essay on Sayers: "While Woolf and Sayers had little enough in common, they shared the dubious honor of being chosen by Q. D. and F. R. Leavis for passionate attack" (10). Even this glancing Leavis connection peters out, as they attack Woolf and Sayers as embodiments of quite different types of affronts to Leavisite values, and Heilbrun's essay is apparently alone in drawing any kind of parallels between the two writers.<sup>1</sup> Indicative of the ships passing in the night quality of their biographies is the curious fact that both lived in Mecklenburgh Square at different times. Sayers had a flat at 44 Mecklenburgh Square in 1921, and it is here that she came up with the concept for the Wimsey detective novels; she gives this address to Harriet Vane in *Gaudy Night* in 1935, and it is from this flat that Vane launches her expedition to Oxford in *Gaudy Night*. Woolf moved into

<sup>1</sup> Sean Latham's "Am I a Snob? *Modernism and the Novel*, which takes its title from Woolf and includes chapters on both Woolf and Sayers, also suggests parallels rather than connections. Where the strands are brought together in the conclusion, he tends to preface Sayers's name by the word "even," marking her out as different from Joyce and Woolf: "for writers such as Woolf, Joyce, and even Sayers" (215); "even Dorothy Sayers" (216; 219).

57. Mecklenburgh Square in a period of late-career reflection during the somber summer of 1939, with the unappreciative response to *Three Guineas* relatively fresh and a world war imminent (and the bombs would fall on Mecklenburgh Square soon enough). These trajectories are evocative, perhaps, of the continuities and discontinuities between the two writers and their careers.

What kind of biographical cross-pollination can we create ourselves out of their separate biographical records? The Oxford-educated Sayers was the only child of a Church of England vicar; after achieving a First in French at Somerville, she found work in advertising, joy in motorcycles and fast cars, and sexual adventures that led to a child out of wedlock. In contrast, Woolf's lack of an Oxbridge education is a well-known part of her engagement with women's intellectual life, and her family experiences could hardly be more different. And yet both women were determined that they would do their own work, valuing it highly, and both were in long-standing marriages with partners who acknowledged its importance and provided support for their wives' intellectual endeavors.<sup>2</sup> Their engagement with official recognition and honors is pertinent here. What claims should women make to education, degrees, and honors? Woolf's exploration of these questions in *Three Guineas* leads to the austere position that women should take no part, should offer only their refusal and form instead a Society of Outsiders. Such a position is not sour grapes but one that Woolf adhered to for herself, turning down prestigious invitations such as the Clark lectures at Cambridge in 1932, an honorary Doctor of Letters from Manchester in 1933, and the Companion of Honor in 1935 (Lee 613, 633, 653). Sayers's relation to such recognition is complex. The recent US reissues of the Wimsey series promote Sayers as "one of the first women to be awarded a degree by Oxford University" which is true, but perhaps slightly misleading. Sayers went up to Oxford in the autumn of 1912, taking her exams in the spring of 1915. Her third year was much different than the first two, with Somerville College commandeered by the War Office and Oxford filled with Belgian refugees. When Oxford began granting women the degrees they earned, Sayers decided to attend the first ceremony on October 14, 1920, because she thought the first "will be so much more amusing" (qtd. in Reynolds 98). In 1943, the Archbishop of Canterbury wanted to honor her with a Doctor of Divinity, but she turned him down; seven years later, she accepted an honorary Doctor of Letters from Durham University and enjoyed using the D.Litt designation (Reynolds 328-29; 359-61).

Turning to the published work and public appearances, again we find no direct connections, but parallels in Woolf's and Sayers's ideas about women and terms of engagement suggest a similar interrogation of 1930s culture. In 1938, for example, Sayers gave a talk to a woman's society entitled "Are Women Human?" in which she begins with an extended discussion of how feminism is past its usefulness and we should, instead, talk about "sex-equality" (21).<sup>3</sup> In "Are Women Human?" and "The Human-Not-Quite-Human," Sayers's chosen examples include several that are intriguingly close to Woolf's in *Three Guineas*. Sayers speaks in a very different voice, striking her own notes, and, however close she comes to Woolf's arguments, Woolf is never mentioned among the many, varied references. Woolf's voluminous citations in *Three Guineas* are similarly devoid of reference to Sayers.

So we must pick up the clues provided by the work itself. Woolf's ongoing interest in the agency of educated men's daughters took many forms;

<sup>2</sup> Unlike Woolf, who took Leonard's surname, Sayers continued to use her own name professionally, even as her son was formally adopted by his stepfather, the Scots journalist Oswald "Mac" Fleming, and began to use his surname. Sayers was never married to the biological father of her son, John Anthony, who was born in 1924, two years before her marriage to Fleming. Although legally John Anthony Sayers, the child was called by the last name of his biological father (White), and raised by Sayers's cousin Ivy Shrimpton. The adoption was arranged in 1934, and in September of 1935 John Anthony was told of the adoption as prelude to beginning his school life as John Anthony Fleming.

<sup>3</sup> This talk, along with another essay and an introduction by Mary McDermott Shideler, was later published by Eerdmans Publishing.

she explored roles both actual and potential, those realizable and those prohibited, and she did so in essays, reviews, and fiction. In the later 1920s, she had called upon the young university women addressed in *A Room of One's Own* to work diligently, to "write books of travel and adventure, and research and scholarship, and history and biography, and criticism and philosophy and science. By so doing you will certainly profit the art of fiction" (142). By the time of *Three Guineas*, the picture is darker. As Woolf notes sardonically, educated, voting women had not transformed the politics of Great Britain, and the Spanish Civil War presaged a larger European conflict. And yet among the many things she asks women *not* to do in that polemic, she does not ask them to stop writing. Her list of the types of research and writing women should do, and the claim that it will benefit fiction, stands. Woolf projects a portrait of contemporary women's fiction, however incomplete its achievement may be, when she concocts *Life's Adventure* for *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf seems to say this is not the kind of novel she herself will write, but it invites us to probe *Gaudy Night*, published in the decade after *A Room of One's Own*, for signs of progress. Two features that Woolf highlights in her representational novel are that Chloe likes Olivia, and that they share a laboratory. *Gaudy Night*'s cast of women academics offers a valuable counterpart to Chloe's and Olivia's *shared* intellectual enterprise and friendship. Over the course of the novel, readers are given information about the research of the dons, whose specializations range across humanities, social science, and science fields. Their female *community*, functioning through respect and loyalty, is emphasized by Peter Wimsey:

The one thing which frustrated the whole attack from first to last was the remarkable solidarity and public spirit displayed by your college as a body. I think that was the last obstacle that X expected to encounter in a community of women. Nothing but the very great loyalty of the Senior Common Room to the College and the respect of the students for the Senior Common Room stood between you and a most unpleasant publicity. (495-96)

Such solidarity among women scholars is something we can still learn from. *Gaudy Night* is a novel that is at once popular genre fiction and a serious literary exploration of women as intellectuals and scholars. It is also a hands-on approach to questions of "how?" and "at what cost?" women scholars should function rather than the principled refusal Woolf would advocate a few years later in *Three Guineas*.

If crime fiction often begins with the main fact accomplished—the murder—and proceeds with a retrospective bent, this is not the case in *Gaudy Night*.<sup>4</sup> Although the initial occasion is a reunion, its focus is in the present, and it is a detective novel without a murder. The novel, the tenth of eleven Wimsey novels, is also a high water mark in the series, a view corroborated by Heilbrun's observation that "In writing *Gaudy Night*, the novel she had prepared herself all her life to write, Sayers had completed her task of transforming the detective story and embodying her vision of intellectual integrity" (10). Sayers would publish only one more Wimsey novel, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937), and it reads as something of an epilogue to the series; after that, Sayers's primary

<sup>4</sup> The novel takes its title from the traditional "gaudy" of the Oxbridge colleges; these events are alumni reunions. At the beginning of the novel, crime-writer Harriet Vane is returning to her alma mater for the first time since she had "broken all her old ties and half the commandments" (3-4) after being tried for the murder of her live-in lover. Shrewsbury College has been experiencing pranks and vandalism; Harriet is asked to stay on after the gaudy to investigate these. As she investigates the increasingly serious attacks, Harriet becomes part of the life of the college, pursues her own writing and research, and negotiates her personal relationship with the famous detective Peter Wimsey whom she met when he found the evidence for her acquittal. At the novel's end, the perpetrator is exposed and rather than an arrest, "the problem is being medically dealt with" (520). The motive for the crime is hatred of women academics, centering on one woman who exposed a man's academic dishonesty, and the criminal activities are intended to punish women who do not devote themselves to families and to damage the women's colleges "where you teach women to take men's jobs" (511).

focus became her Christian humanism and her translation of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, which was published in Penguin Classics in the post-war period and is still in print. Sayers herself was well aware of *Gaudy Night*'s significance, as revealed in her letter to Victor Gollancz<sup>5</sup> upon its completion:

It is the only book I've written embodying any kind of a "moral" and I do feel rather passionately about this business of the integrity of the mind— but I realise that to make a "detective story" the vehicle for that kind of thing is (as Miss de Vine says of the Peter-Harriet marriage) "reckless to the point of insanity." But there it is—it's the book I wanted to write and I've written it—and it is now my privilege to leave you with the baby! Whether you advertise it as a love-story or as educational propaganda, or as a lunatic freak, I leave to you. (qtd. in Reynolds 261)

Sayers' comments here show the consciousness of the genre blending that her commitment to her "moral" about intellectual integrity produced. It is not unlike Woolf's original concept for the Pargiters that she later split into *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, work which taxed her energy and consumed a great deal of time. Sayers, like Woolf, knew that she risked incomprehension or worse from readers who had definite generic expectations for her work. While *The Years* was highly successful, the planned factual "interchapters" that Woolf spun off to become the foundation of *Three Guineas* were read less receptively, partly because of readers' expectations of Woolf. What Woolf separated, Sayers kept together; both strategies have value, and both carry risks, as Woolf and Sayers were well aware.<sup>6</sup>

Crime fiction scholar Heta Pyrhönen notes that "Sayers' *Gaudy Night* (1935) is frequently cited as the first overtly feminist detective novel in its concern for female character and female development in a male dominated world" (108-09). Thinking of the novel alongside *Three Guineas*, with its sustained emphasis on women's social, professional, and financial independence, adds 1930s resonance to that status; it is a novel specifically about women's intellectual labor and its costs. The novel enacts its own themes: the plot brings to life the social and institutional contexts of women's intellectual activity, and its events demonstrate the personal costs paid by women intellectuals. Contextualizing Harriet Vane and Peter Wimsey's search for an intimate relationship that enables truly equal partnership within an examination of the intellectual life in an Oxbridge women's college creates a blended form that incorporates themes and strategies often associated with Woolf.

My exploration of common elements in Woolf's and Sayers's work life, public integrity, and perdurability, however lacking in direct connection these two important figures were in their own time, claims Woolf and Sayers as sister intellectuals in the late 1930s. Why bother? Because we must locate and record these connections ourselves when, for example, Stefan Collini's 500+ page study of intellectuals in twentieth-century Britain creates a strong impression that there were no women intellectuals at all.<sup>7</sup> When Sayers turned down the Doctor of Divinity offered her by the Archbishop of Canterbury, her main reason for doing so was an *intellectual* one: acknowledging the great honor he offers, she tells him that "I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an *intellectual pattern*" (qtd. in Reynolds

329; my emphasis). In the second half of the 1930s, both Sayers and Woolf wrote the books they wanted to write, although they knew those works might be met by incomprehension and disdain, because of their belief that women must find the work they are meant to do and do it. Sayers's Harriet Vane has made herself an outsider through her scandalous post-Oxford life, but she still has the membership card: "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" (9). From this insider/outsider vantage point, Sayers can use Harriet to examine the education of women and the role of women intellectuals. The criminal activity of the novel, driven by hatred of female scholars, allows Sayers to show the high costs paid by intellectual women; it also allows her to argue that women are entitled to pursue intellectual work about which they are passionate. While Woolf was a visitor to Oxford and Cambridge, always conscious of how her brothers had received the education she was denied, Sayers was a participant and graduate. Perhaps Woolf would have deprecated Sayers' participation in these dramas of certification, given what Hermione Lee calls her "settled dislike . . . of universities" (635), but I like to think she would have enjoyed Sayers's "monstrous impertinence" in locating her fictional Shrewsbury College in the exact location of the real-world emblem of male privilege, Balliol College's "spacious and sacred cricket-ground" (Author's Note to *Gaudy Night* xii).

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<sup>5</sup> Although he is best known to scholars of the 1930s for his role in founding the Left Book Club, Victor Gollancz also published important contemporary fiction throughout the inter-war period.

<sup>6</sup> With *Gaudy Night*, "her most literary novel" (173), Sean Latham situates Sayers "at the perilous intersection of two increasingly divergent literary cultures . . . the highbrow critics and creators of modernism [and] Sayers' own dedicated readership" (198).

<sup>7</sup> Of the mere handful of women cited in Collini's book, only Virginia Woolf and Iris Murdoch receive more than two references in the index and, although he has a chapter entitled "Outsider Studies," *Three Guineas* is not mentioned.

