Allegorical Reference to Oxford University through Classical Myth in the Early Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reading of “Alma Mater” from OP.I.

Barbara L. Prescott
Independent Scholar

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons, Language and Literacy Education Commons, Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol36/iss2/5

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
Allegorical Reference to Oxford University through Classical Myth in the Early Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reading of “Alma Mater” from OP.I.

Abstract
Dorothy L. Sayers is rarely considered to be an author of mythopoeic literature or one whose own writings contain the metaphors or allegories of myth and legend. Yet, as a young adult at Oxford University, Sayers produced a variety of poems that, centering upon Oxford and her experiences as a student, explored mythic themes as they related to the university. Her early poems, written while an undergraduate at Oxford and directly afterward, were built upon three motifs: classical mythology, mediaeval legend, and Christian romanticism. These Oxford-centered poems were included in Dorothy L. Sayers’s first book titled, OP.I., published in 1916 by Basil Blackwell as part of the Adventurers All series. Sayers delighted in the use of ancient mythopoeic allusions to Oxford University, referring to this academic kingdom of enchantment by various symbolic means and devices. Although her interest in supernatural literature is not often acknowledged, Sayers was deeply involved, in her young writing years, with the romanticism of myth and legend, particularly as it inspired her early poetry.

In this paper, I focus on one major motif found in OP.I., that of classical mythology, particularly within the context of Hellenic legend, which Sayers applied in the first poem of OP.I., titled, “Alma Mater”. In “Alma Mater”, an extended narrative poem recounting the story of Helen, Paris, and Idaeus, Sayers introduces the symbolism of the Trojan Cycle in allegorical reference to Oxford University, and as the story holds allegorical keys to Sayers’s own experiences and orientation to Oxford. The importance accorded the narrative poem in length and pride of place within the book sets the tone of OP.I. The myth-centered allegorical devices used by Sayers give us a rare and clarifying perspective on the poetic imagination of young Dorothy L. Sayers, as expressed within this first book of poems, set within the legendary kingdom of Oxford University.

Additional Keywords
Sayers, Dorothy L. OP.I.; Sayers, Dorothy L. “Alma Mater”; Oxford in Dorothy L. Sayers

Cover Page Footnote
Many thanks to The Marion E. Wade Center for ready access to the original manuscripts of Dorothy L. Sayers. Particular thanks to Laura Schmidt, Archivist, and Elaine Powell Hooker, Librarian, for their most helpful and knowledgeable assistance in tracking down relevant letters, notes, and manuscripts of Dorothy L. Sayers.
Narrative Reference to Oxford University through Classical Myth in the Early Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reading of “Alma Mater” from OP. I.

Barbara L. Prescott

“Helen, close-girded with immortal spells
Of beauty and of ancient power,
........................
“Helen, my mother, whom I greatly love—
Nowise for that majestic grace,
The changeless beauty of the seed of Jove
Set godlike on thy face [...].”
(“Alma Mater” stanzas 14, 24)

In the midst of her Oxford University years, primarily between 1913-1915, Dorothy L. Sayers began to write poems about her impressions of Oxford and of her experiences as an undergraduate student. To Sayers, Oxford University was a place of legend, equal to, if not better than, the spellbound kingdoms about which she had earlier written in poems.1 From October 11, 1912, the date she entered University, to the end of her life, Sayers was enchanted by the world of Oxford. She was not particularly enchanted by academia,2 but she loved the rarified and mythical environment of Oxford University. That fascination came to life through her written poetry and was realized materially through publication, in December 1916, of her first poetry collection, OP. I., noted as No. 9 in Adventurers All: A Series of Young Poets Unknown to Fame, a book series published by Basil Blackwell, Oxford.3

---

1 While a student at Godolphin School (1909-1911), Sayers wrote poems and plays based on medieval adventure and legend, some set in mythic, other-worldly, kingdoms, e.g., “Earl Ulfric,” “Duke Hilary,” “Sir Ernest Shackleton,” “Captivo Ignoto,” “Death of the Sun,” “The King That Feared His Fate” (Folder DLS MS-365, Marion E. Wade Center).
2 The official community of scholarship in Oxford University to which Sayers referred as “Academé” (“Eros in Academé” 110).
3 Sayers was teaching at Hull School when OP. I. was published by Basil Blackwell in December 1916. The next year, in May 1917, she took a paid intern’s position with the Blackwell publishing company in Oxford.
Within this small book of poetry, Sayers lays out a rhythmically structured series of thirteen titled poems (these composed of thirty-six shorter poems) which incorporate themes of classical myth, medieval legend, bewitchment, hypnosis, dreadful premonition, loss of godly gifts, spellbinding love, magical dimension, prayer, incantation, hidden symbolism, repercussions of betrayal, and various other aspects of divine intervention and supernatural power. Within this framework, Sayers’s poems weave a web of charmed experience, of a world where the past melds with the present and future, where fairytales and myth weave through mundane normative daily existence, in the world of Oxford University.

The poems of OP. I. are a collection of allegorical references to Oxford University. Sayers employs classical, medieval, and Christian, analogies to express her vision and interpretations of the Oxfordian academic world built upon the literary devices of allegory, symbolism, and metaphor. The book is a carefully constructed and organized set of poetic windows to her Oxford experience from 1912 to 1915.

In this paper, I focus on Sayers’s use of the first of these overarching worlds of myth and romance, that of classical mythology, as she applied Hellenic legend in allegorical reference to the world of early twentieth century Oxford University as a recurring motif in several poems of this book, particularly through her seminal epic poem, “Alma Mater,” the primary poem within the main text of OP. I. The cohesive poetic ties that link “Alma Mater” with the second piece, “Lay,” a metrically interlaced series of twelve poems, each poem a medieval allegory of Oxford, are briefly introduced.

Dorothy L. Sayers began her adult writing life as a poet and ended her writing life with the translation of Dante’s poetry. In fact, Sayers considered herself, throughout her life, primarily a poet and translator of medieval verse (Reynolds 185; Brabazon 126). Her reading public, on the other hand, most often associates Sayers with the genres of mystery fiction and theatre, and perhaps with lay Christian apologetics. Her fame, resting mostly on these genres, does not usually include a serious consideration of Sayers as poet, nor do her critics or supporters often consider the value of her poetry within Sayers’s writing life (Kenney 6-7).

On the contents page, thirteen poems are titled, but there are two untitled poems before the main text. “Lay” contains twelve shorter poems, “The Last Castle” contains eleven poems, “The Elder Knight” contains three numbered poems, and “Rondels” consists of two poems, making a total of thirty-eight poems (36+2) within OP. I.

The Iliad (Ιλιάδα) and The Odyssey (Οδύσσεια) by Homer are Sayers’s primary Hellenic sources referenced in OP. I.

The syncretism of medieval symbolism and Christian romanticism by Sayers within the poems of OP. I. is discussed in a forthcoming paper.
There appears to be something of a disconnection between Sayers’s view of herself, as poet and translator, and the opinions of her reading public who catalog her work primarily within the genres of prose or play-writing. The dismissal of Sayers’s poetry as serious or professional writing has led to an incomplete view of Sayers’s literary corpus, or at the least, gives limited perspective to the true scope of Sayers’s literary strength. Furthermore, the topics and themes Sayers explored within her poetry were, at times, vastly different from the themes she explored in fiction and nonfiction prose. The transcendent, mythic themes and structures explored in her early poetry provide added dimension to our view of the grand imagination of Dorothy L. Sayers, further contributing clues to the well-designed structure of her later fiction, plays, and essays.7

During this early period of her life, poetry, in its subtlety of message and variant structure, was Sayers’s venue of choice to express images of fantasy and thoughts regarding legendary Oxford, particularly of her own experiences within this academic kingdom which opened multiple doors of knowledge to her (Coomes 63). The vehicle of poetry allowed her imagination free rein to explore new ideas, mythical analogies, even insightful epiphanies, regarding the ancient power and grandeur of Oxford. Within the boundaries of poetic form, Sayers’s own structured yet imaginative mind employed various literary devices, such as allegorical reference, analogy, and symbolism to communicate, subtly yet effectively, her own Oxford impressions and experiences. As C.S. Lewis once stated, considering his occasionally-questioned choice to convey powerful messages through the genre of fantasy literature, “Sometimes fairy stories may say best what’s to be said” (Lewis 45). Sayers chose, during this period of her life, the poetry of fantasy, myth, and legend to say best what needed to be said regarding her experiences as a student at Oxford University in the early twentieth century.

Sayers deeply appreciated and often explored romantic, charmed, legendary worlds and characters, turning the ageless lessons inherent in those primeval stories toward her modern twentieth century world. Her interest in those mythopoeic themes is manifested first and most clearly in her early poetry and often in the poetry she wrote during her Oxford years or shortly thereafter. In fact, young Sayers felt comfortable in the classical and medieval realms of enchantment, having a skilled knowledge of both Latin and Greek, thanks to her father’s tutelage at an early age. Sayers often used classical quotations in letters to her parents while at Oxford.8

---

7 Dawson Gaillard notes this ‘touch of the eternal’ in Sayers’s detective fiction (89-103).
8 Sayers began to study Latin with her father at the age of seven, becoming quite adept in Latin and French. Often, she incorporated Latin quotations in her letters home from
She was clearly conversant in the worlds within which brave warriors, unpredictable gods, tested ladies, and spell-casting goddesses defy the bounds of social expectation to partake in the adventure of heroic, star-crossed, romantic encounters. Such adventure was inherently tied to the magic of tragedy in various forms of obsession, betrayal, hypnosis, shape-shifting, spell-binding mishaps, and dreadful trials ending in death, all of which ensure eternal mythic recognition. In other words, Sayers reveled in the larger-than-life heroic romances of classical myth, medieval literature, and the adventure of Christianity. Most fortuitously, she found and recognized her own romantically mythic kingdom in Oxford. Then she wrote poems about it.

Sayers wrote most of the poems comprising *OP. I.* during the years 1913-15. She wrote of mythic romance and adventure but experimented objectively with different poetic structures as technical exercises in the creation of these poems. To Sayers, myth and imagination went hand in hand with skill in poetic structure. This dual purpose would serve her well when later constructing her imaginative, amusing, yet beautifully structured, Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries.

In a letter to Dorothy Rowe dated October 1915, Sayers writes that she had been practicing writing “rondeaux and other technical exercises, ‘trying different shapes and models with different lengths of line and arrangements of time and refrain.’” They were written, Sayers clearly states, mainly for enjoyment.

I thought I’d just revel a bit in the dear old obvious glories of scarlet cloaks and dragons and Otherworld Journeys, and the clank and gurgle of alliteration, and the gorgeousness of proper names. So you are to read it in this spirit, please, if possible at night and by the fire. (Reynolds 70)

A number of these technical exercises in poetry were transformed by Sayers into her first book of poems titled *OP. I.*, published in 1916 by Basil Blackwell of Oxford as part of the publisher’s series, *Adventurers All*, in a limited edition of 350 copies.

When considering the text of the book, we are first struck by the title, *OP. I.*, i.e., Opus One. What does it mean? Sayers gives us several clues. An opus, by definition, is a separate composition or set of compositions by a particular composer, usually ordered by date of publication. Sayers was an active member of the Oxford Bach Choir from 1912-1915, possessing a good contralto voice, and Oxford. On 10 November 1912, she wrote: “subita gelidus formidine sanguis deriguit” (“My blood chilled and froze with sudden fear”) (Letters I.67). The reference is to the appearance of the Fury to the Trojans from Virgil, *Aeneid* III when she chanced to meet her aunt in church.
joined the choir again when she returned to Oxford in 1917. She loved music, the structures of music, and singing in the Bach Choir. Sayers had a good ear which served her well in the creation of poetic rhythm, cadence, and rhyme. The title, *OP. I.*, may well have been a nod to the Bach choir conducted by Sir Hugh Percy Allen, for she acknowledges that choir, as well as Allen, in the dedication. As a result, the unusual title, often regarded as curious, is, in truth, quite reasonable, clearly indicating a first published book of lyrical poems, Sayers being the composer, with the numbered title optimistically pointing to the possibility of other books following (Reynolds 69).

There may be an additional reason for the abbreviation *OP* which is also an acronym for *Oxford Poetry*, a journal to which Sayers contributed poems from 1915 and of which she was an editor during the years 1917-1919. Sayers’s subtle sense of humor would have welcomed a title which cleverly indicated multiple references or double meanings. She named her first book *OP. I.* to reflect her own student experiences at Oxford University and to stand as a poetic allegory of her personal memories formed in that enchanted kingdom of ancient wisdom and arcane ritual. Upon opening the book, before the title page, one meets a quotation, centered within a border of mythological illustrations, composed of excerpts from Tennyson’s “Ulysses”⁹ that sets the tone of the *Adventurers All* series of which Sayers’s book is part:

COME MY FRIENDS *** ’TIS NOT TOO LATE TO SEEK A NEWER WORLD * IT MAY BE THAT THE GULFS WILL WASH US DOWN ** IT MAY BE WE SHALL TOUCH THE HAPPY ISLES—YET—OUR—PURPOSE HOLDS *** TO SAIL BEYOND THE SUNSET. ULYSSES.

(*OP. I. frontispiece)*

Although this quotation is included by Basil Blackwell in every *Adventurers All* volume, one is struck by the singular appropriateness of the words to Sayers’s poetry collection, *OP. I.* The reader is introduced immediately to the promise of a new unknown world, to the promise of a heroic odyssey as we “sail beyond the sunset,” to a key that will open for us a mystical world of “the happy isles.” We are being prepared for the unexpected adventure leading to an ensorcelled realm in which can be found either death or new life, the ending balanced by our intent, the tantalizing contingency influenced by our acts. We are encouraged to hold true to our purpose of moving forward intrepidly into the future, but the resultant ends are unpredictable. Often, we are simply at the

---

⁹The power of Tennyson’s “Ulysses” is punctuated by his subtle use of translated wording from Homer’s *Odyssey*, e.g., “δεῦτε, φίλοι […]” (“come, [my] friends […]” OD.2.410). This epigraph is constructed by Basil Blackwell from various excerpts from Tennyson’s poem, which, at times, may point directly to the wording of *The Odyssey* itself.
mercy of the Fates. Still we embark on the adventure. With that spirit, Sayers entered Oxford, and, in that spirit, she invites us to take a mythical, poetic, journey with her.

There are thirteen titled poems that comprise the main collection of OP. I. Sayers was experimenting with different poetry forms, particularly with the narrative epic poem, ballad, lai, sonnet, and rondel. Each of these forms may be found in OP. I. and are of importance when considering the overall structure of the book. However, when considering those critical references to Oxford University that comprise the main theme of OP. I., Sayers’s analogies, symbolism, and semantic links prove most helpful. In “Alma Mater,” the powerful mythic allegories employed by Sayers are sourced directly from Hellenic legend.

The first, and single longest, poem in the main body of the book is taken from the classical Greek myth, The Iliad, by Homer. Sayers bestows the title “Alma Mater” on this primary poem, an extended narrative epic of fifty-one alternatively rhymed quatrains recounting the stories of Helen, Paris, and Idaeus. Sayers begins her collection deliberately and strongly with a famous tale from the Trojan Cycle, that of the abduction of Helen by Paris and Helen’s later return, after the death of Paris, to her first husband, Menelaus, and to her home in Sparta. However, in her own retelling of the myth, Sayers uses some poetic license in her interpretation of the plot.

In Homer’s Iliad, Helen’s role is almost that of a pawn, moving back and forth between her first war-loving husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta, and handsome Paris, son of Priam, king of Troy, who steals her from Menelaus and claims her as wife along with her property. Indeed, Helen, as described in Homer’s account, is considered herself to be valuable personal property as a wife claimed by each of her competing husbands.

while he himself in the middle and warlike Menelaos
fight alone for the sake of Helen and all her possessions.
That one of them who wins and is proved stronger, let him
take the possessions fairly and the woman, and lead her homeward […]

(The Iliad [IL].3.90-93)

10 Helen is a demi-goddess, daughter of Zeus and Leda. Paris is the son of Priam, king of Troy. Paris abducts Helen by the design of the goddess, Aphrodite. Idaeus is the son of Helen and Paris.

11 “αὐτὸν δ’ ἐν μέσσῳ καὶ ἀρηΐφιλον Μενέλαον / οἴους ἀμφ’ Ἑλένῃ καὶ κτήμασι πᾶσι
μάχεσθαι. / ὁππότερος δέ κε νικήσῃ κρείσσων τε γένηται / κτήμαθ’ ἑλὼν εὗ πάντα
γυναῖκα τε οἴκαβ’ ἀγέσθω:” (IL.3.90-93).
“White-armed” Helen is beautiful, desirable, but powerless, having little to say about her own destiny, marital situation, or even about her own choice of residence. She is at the mercy of husbands, fathers, goddesses (Aphrodite and Athena), and the warring politics of the day. In the story of The Iliad, Helen is a hapless tool of gods and men.

Helen is further portrayed as the victim of Paris, who violates the accepted laws of hospitality by stealing his host’s wife. Despite being acknowledged as victim, Helen is blamed, along with Paris, for the tragedy of the Trojan War.

Surely there is no blame on Trojans and strong-greaved Achaians if for long time they suffer hardship for a woman like this one. Terrible is the likeness of her face to immortal goddesses. Still, though she be such, let her go away in the ships, lest she be left behind, a grief to us and our children. (IL.3.156-160)

Sayers, on the other hand, in her retelling of Helen’s story within the poem “Alma Mater,” characterizes Helen as one with formidable supernatural power, emphasizing Helen’s immortal status as demi-goddess (daughter of Zeus), her spellbinding hypnosis over men, and her ability to change history as well as the destiny of mortal lives by her innate, goddess-like, capacities.

“I was begot by heaven out of earth,
Travail of earth and joy of heaven,
And in the slow unfolding of my birth
Came power; and I was given

“To man at length, to be a burning brand
And a Promethean fire to be,—
Look upon me, my son, and understand
Why men were slain for me.” (“Alma Mater” [“AM”] stanzas 35, 36)

Within the context of “Alma Mater,” Helen is portrayed in remote majesty, being above the mundane problems of mortal men. Helen may be a tool of implacable Fate, but she can change the destiny of mortals by her gifts. In this interpretation, Paris is at Helen’s mercy in his role as obsessed Idalian shepherd-boy who is

---

12 “Ἑλένῃ λευκωλένῳ” (“Helen of the white arms”) (IL.3.121).
13 “οὐ νέμεσις Τρῶας καὶ ἐὐκνήμιδας Ἀχαιοὺς / τοιῇδ’ ἀμφὶ γυναικὶ πολὺν χρόνον ἀλγεὰ πάσχειν / αἰνὼς ἀθανάτηρι θεῆς εἰς ὡτα ἔουειν: /ἀλλὰ καὶ ὥς τοιῃ περ ἐνύσ’ ἐν νηροὶ νεεσθώ, / μηδ’ ἡμῖν τεκέεσσι τ’ ὀτίσσω πῆμα λίποιτα” (IL.3.156-160).
14 Paris was the natural son of Priam, king of Troy, but was reared by shepherds on Mount Ida (hence, “Idalian shepherd-boy”), and his early youth was spent as an innocent,
lifted to fame by the machinations of the immortals. Sayer’s Helen is, by her very existence, an invincible, destiny-shaping force, “close-girded with immortal spells of beauty and of ancient power” (“AM” stanza 14).

In the first half of the poem, Helen’s seductive power over Paris and the resultant tragedy of obsession is explored. In the second half of the poem, Helen’s relationship with her natural son, Idaeus, involving a change in her role from paramour to nurturer, deliberately shifts the perspective of the poem. This shift by Sayers is critical in the dichotomous relationships that Helen assumes with respect to Paris and Idaeus and points to Sayers’s interpretation of her own university experience. By her emphasis on the three main characters in this mythological story, rather than on the plot, Sayers is directing our attention to the allegorical significance of these characters in “Alma Mater.” By including a shift of perspective, or volta, in this poem, Sayers alerts us to the possibility of double meanings associated with the role of each character and in the relationships of Paris and Idaeus to Helen. Furthermore, Sayers bestows, with subtle but deliberate intent, the title “Alma Mater” on this primary poem, adding allegorical weight to the narrative epic.

Sayers wrote the poem “Alma Mater” while a student at Oxford. The term Alma Mater, i.e., ‘Nourishing Mother,’ used almost exclusively as a term of affection for one’s school, refers clearly to Oxford University. But why title the story of Helen and Paris, a myth of obsessive love, by that name? Sayers did initially give the poem a subtitle, “Idaeus,” as a hint, but that subtitle does little by itself to clear up the mystery. However, the primary title was no mistake. It had deliberate allegorical reference. Sayers knew quite well the significance of that eternal beauty which casts a hypnotic spell, paralleling her own life and lasting relationship with Oxford. She observed, as well, the effect of that rarified protective environment upon the lives of others. It is a subtle title with a double meaning. “Helen, close-girded with immortal spells,” is also the nourishing unworldly boy tending sheep. Sayers emphasizes his naivete and innocence, and even lack of worldly judgment, in his obsession with Helen. In Sayers’s retelling, Paris is the hapless pawn in the tragedy.

15 The Iliad by Homer, Book 3, provides Sayers’s main inspiration for the story of Helen and Paris (a.k.a. Alexander).

16 The subtitle, “Idaeus,” is included in the original handwritten manuscript of OP. I. (DLS MS-167, Marion E. Wade Center) but is not included in the published version of “Alma Mater.” Idaeus is the natural son of Helen and Paris in Greek mythology. His name, “Idaeus,” echoes Paris’s nickname, “Idalian shepherd boy,” and alludes to Mount Ida which houses the realm of the gods. Sayers refers to the father/son relationship when Idaeus states “when the sack of Troy went by, / I, a weak babe on Helen’s breast, / Passed from my father’s land unwittingly, / Duke Menelaus’ guest” (“AM” stanza 21). Helen returns to Sparta and Menelaus with Idaeus.
mother, the *Alma Mater*. Mythical Helen, who so enchants yet so nourishes, represents Oxford University. Hence, the title, “Alma Mater,” is a metaphor, a symbolic reference to the university.

The allegory which Sayers creates and explores through this poem references, primarily, the characters of Helen, Paris, and Idaeus. With that reference in mind, we may begin to view the entire narrative poem, with its mythological cast of characters, in the light of an allegorical story, and most intriguingly, a story which reflects Sayers’s own personal experiences and observations in the legendary world of Oxford University. If Helen represents Oxford, what (or whom) do Paris and Idaeus represent? To answer this question, we now turn to the poem itself.

The epic poem is introduced by two epigraphs, the first by Harold Giles Dixey, an undergraduate poet and friend of Sayers, from his “Sonnet on Oxford”:

“Far beneath
My holier passion, in their eyes and ears
Enchantment vast but foolish lingereth.” (“AM”)

The second epigraph is a rather long-winded German quotation from *Sintram* by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué, in which it is explained to a youth, Sintram, that Paris was given an opportunity by the goddess Aphrodite, in exchange for the golden apple, to take Helen away and live with her for ten years, during which time Troy would be protected from its enemies. However, when ten years were over, Paris’s family and Troy itself would be destroyed. Sintram exclaims, curiously, that if Paris did not agree to that, he was a fool.

With this quotation, Sayers prepares her readers for the plot of the narrative poem. As Sayers was trained well to consult original sources, thus

---

17 I use the term “epic” throughout this article in its wider sense of an extended narrative poem in elevated or dignified language that tells a story central to the myths and beliefs of a people. There is no set number of lines prescribed to an epic, only a notion of length. The fifty-one verses of “Alma Mater” give a sense of epic length to the narrative story.

18 “Die Zauberin war ehrlich gegen den Ritter,” fuhr der Alte fort, “sie sagte ihm gleich voraus, wenn er die reizende Herzogin nach seiner Veste Troja entfuehre, muesse es das sein und seiner Burg und seines ganzen Stammes Untergang warden, aber zehn Jahre lang konne er sich in Troja vertheidigen, und Helens suesser Liebe froh sein.” “Und er nahm es an, oder er war ein Tropf!” rief der Jeungling. (De la Motte Fouqué, *Sintram*, 1813. ch. 7., par. 16). (“The sorceress acted honourably towards Paris,” continued the old man. “She declared to him that if he would carry away the lovely duchess to his own city Troy, he might do so, and thus cause the ruin of his whole house and of his country; but that during ten years he would be able to defend himself in Troy, and rejoice in the sweet love of
quoting the original German of Fouqué was entirely appropriate to her book. When considering this passage, however, one may reasonably assume that the Fouqué epigraph is “mere ornament, not at all essential to the matter” of the main body of poems (Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers* 26). At first glance, the placement of this German epigraph does appear rather stuffy and unnecessary. However, taking a closer look at both epigraphs may be fruitful. It was not a frivolous choice. Sayers used two quotations deliberately and with purpose. There is specific reason for using both quotations, and that reason, which parallels an earlier set of poems placed at the beginning of the book, is to present two opposite points of view about the legendary world of Oxford University. Considered together, these dichotomous viewpoints set the mood for the entire book of *OP. I.*

H. Giles Dixey, in the first epigraph, states clearly that lingering enchantment with Oxford by some is “vast but foolish.” He chooses a “holier passion” that directs him away from succumbing entirely to the enchantment of the other-worldly kingdom of the university. His words warn against becoming hypnotized by the rarified, artificial atmosphere of Oxford and surrendering one’s life to it. To Dixey that “holier passion” may well have included protecting England during the war. As an armored knight, one is dedicated to larger, higher interests that direct one to live or die in the world. Sayers, herself, throughout her life remained drawn to Oxford but not to the cloistered life of academia. She chose to live in the world by embracing the practical professions of publishing, advertising, and writing popular detective fiction. Sayers recognized the hypnotic spell of the university yet was able to pull away from it, as did Dixey.

The title of Dixey’s poem is telling; he wrote a sonnet on Oxford, rather than to Oxford. Most interestingly, Dixey eventually became assistant master at the Dragon School, a prep school in the city of Oxford. Like Sayers, he left the university but returned to the vicinity, within the enchanted sphere, of Oxford.

"And he accepted those terms, or he was a fool!” cried the youth.) (Trans. Charlotte May Yonge, 2002).

19 The earlier two poems to which I refer, both written by Sayers and untitled, are located after the dedication and before the contents page. The first of these introductory poems represents beginnings: starting with a practical strong foundation. The second untitled poem presents fateful endings and magical conditions: there is no cure for an inevitable ending. They represent two opposing perspectives, incidentally containing the whole story between them.

20 In 1916, the year *OP. I.* was published, England was in the midst of World War I. Oxford University lost approximately one-third of its male student population to the war. Many, like Dixey, enlisted, interrupting their studies at Oxford. Dixey survived the war to write several books of poetry about his experiences.
With Sayers’s characteristic subtlety, it is significant that she dedicated “Alma Mater” to Dixey, her like-minded friend.

The youth, Sintram, takes the opposite view. Faced with the opportunity of possessing Helen with all her beauty as companion and lover for ten years, Sintram cries out immediately that Paris would be a fool not to accept. With like reasoning, some would it consider it foolish not to accept the valuable gifts that are offered students and scholars by Oxford University, as Paris so accepted the rare, hypnotic, world of Helen. Sintram would not hesitate to accept the pleasure, the enchantment, despite the certainty of ultimate, looming, tragedy. Sintram and Paris live for the moment and for the immediate gratification of desire.

Sintram and Dixey, on the other hand, represent two ends of a spectrum. One will accept, unhesitatingly, the advantages as well as constraints within the ritualized environment offered by Oxford, for as long as possible; the other resists the enchantment and breaks free by choosing other purposes and goals in life. Sayers presents the dichotomy with characteristically subtle humor. We, as her readers, must look for it and appreciate that which she presents us at the beginning of this primary poem. As a result, both epigraphs are necessary to provide the opposing choices and boundaries that structure the Oxford experience. Students must make their own choice to embrace the enchantment with its constraints or to resist it by leaving, and so move freely forward with their lives. Dixey and Sayers each chose to move on.

It is interesting to note that in the original, hand-written manuscript of OP. I., there is included a third short epigraph by François Villon: “Et mourut Paris ou Helene,” which was later removed by Sayers from “Alma Mater” and not included in the final published version. It may have been considered redundant, or confusing, to the preceding epigraphs, and therefore, unnecessary. The extant preceding epigraphs provide, satisfactorily, the two opposing choices given one regarding the Oxford experience. By her deletion of this extraneous quotation, Sayers provides evidence of the care she gave to the elegant structure of OP. I.

“Alma Mater,” for its message, symbolic imagery, length, and pride of place, is certainly the seminal poem of OP. I. It is structured as an extended narrative poem composed of fifty alternately rhymed quatrains with an iambic stress pattern. The importance of this poem to the theme of the book must be understood as Sayers intended it should be understood for its symbolism and introduction to the divinely powerful kingdom of Oxford University. As a

21 DLS MS-167. Folder. Leaves 6-24, 51 Verses. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL.
result, we should examine, in depth, the symbolism of this classical myth that reflects so beautifully the Oxford allegory, through the poetic lens of Sayers, as an early twentieth century Oxford student.

The poem begins directly, and rather matter-of-factly:

When Aphrodite offered a brief bliss
To the Idalian shepherd-boy,
He chose ten rapturous years of Helen’s kiss,
And then, the sack of Troy. (“AM” stanza 1)

In the original, handwritten manuscript of OP. I., the poem begins on leaf ten (p. 5), which is also pencil-illustrated in color by Sayers. At the top right-hand corner of the page is a drawing of three goddesses: Aphrodite, Athene, and Hera. An owl (Athene’s portent) is flying along with other birds on the right. Mount Ida is featured in the background, and a large peacock feather ending in a heart is drawn on the left of the page. This artwork enhances the classical symbolism of enchantment, obsession, and prophecy inherent in “Alma Mater,” but it exists only in the manuscript, and is not included in the published book.

Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love, to win a contest and the golden apple, tempts Paris, the judge, with beautiful Helen in order to secure the prize. The gods are known to flaunt their gifts and advantages to tempt mortals. If Aphrodite wins the contest, Paris wins Helen. Paris accepts the bribe, even with the contingency of time and looming disaster. The prize is temporary, to last ten years, and will eventually end for Paris in the loss of everything he holds dear. Still, the temptation to enjoy the gift of Helen is too great.

Yet do not
bring up against me the sweet favours of golden Aphrodite
Never to be cast away are the gifts of the gods, magnificent, which they give of their own will. (IL.3.63-66)

Paris is well aware of the conditions to the gift, as he is of its temporary nature, yet is overwhelmed in his desire to accept that gift. He cannot refuse, and the immortal story of enchantment, spellbound love, and divine intervention advances to its predictable end.

Sayers, in turn, won a god-gifted contest whose prize was attendance at Oxford. She received the Gilchrist Scholarship for Modern Languages which was her key to attending the mythical university. Sayers was aware that this was

---

23 DLS MS-167. Folder. Leaves 6-24. 51 Verses. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL.

24 νόος ἔστι: / μὴ μοι δῶρ’ ἐρατὰ πρόφερε χρυσῆς Ἀφροδίτης, / οὐ τοι ἀπόβλητη’ ἐστὶ θεῶν ἐμικυδέα δῶρα, / ὅσσα κεν αὐτοὶ δῶσιν (IL.3.63-66).
a temporary gift, to last only three years, but it was her means to enjoy the enchanted, ancient, and rare world that Oxford offered. She accepted the gift, knowing that, in the end, she would lose her student pension; she would ‘go down.’ Clearly seeing those elements of the Greek story within her own life, although in slight variation to that given in the original myth, Sayers’s subtle, somewhat humorous, metaphorical identification with Paris does not stop there. She enters the enchantment willingly and is hypnotized by the beauty of Oxford University: “Thou art so magical / thou makest me afraid” (“Lay” part IV).

The next several verses tell of Paris’s torn emotions and loyalties, as he obsessively desires Helen and his gifted life, yet watches anxiously for the first signs “Of Ilion in fire” (“AM” stanza 2).

Therefore, the while he called on Helen’s name,
And watched with apprehensive eye
To catch the first avenging glare of flame,
His soul was like to die […]. (“AM” stanza 5)

This tearing of loyalties, an inherent conflict in the mind and soul of Paris, must have been felt in like manner by many students attending University during the years of World War I. Oxford was a protected realm, but the world was on fire. Most people must have thought it was only a matter of time before the inferno consumed England as well. Oxford sacrificed approximately one-third of its male students to that inferno. One week they were living a gifted life; the next they were in hellfire, as sacrificial victims, and many died in that hell. They were a sacrifice of the best and brightest, often required in myth for godly appeasement. The fragility of this enchanted realm became evident as the war continued. Several narrative verses point clearly to the similarities between the anxiety-ridden situation of Paris and that of the students at Oxford.

“O happy lovers that can sleep, nor know
What term is set them by the Fates!
I slumber not, nor shall, until the foe
Strike upon Ilion gates.

“How should I so let slip the precious time
The gods mete out so meagrely?
Each word we speak rings like a dreadful chime,
Marking the hours that flee.” (“AM” stanzas 8-9)

Sayers dwells, for eighteen verses, upon the themes of obsession, enchantment, over-hanging tragedy and fear of the aftermath. It is the story of Paris under the divine influence of Helen and her eternal, ancient power. It is a choice that must
end in tragedy for the hapless youth, Paris, and Sayers acknowledges the inevitable ending, as she fears a possible tragic ending for several of her friends, and for many others at Oxford—indeed for Oxford itself:

So, ere the towers of Ilion fell in smoke,
Like some dear dream that breaks and flies,
And fierce Pelides\textsuperscript{25} through the breaches broke,
In grief did Paris rise

To follow fate out to the bitter close,
Feeling the nearness of the end,
And saw, amid the press of angry foes,
Death as his only friend. ("AM" stanzas 17-18)

Paris meets his foreseen end, but Helen, majestic, powerful, ancient, beautiful, cannot be destroyed by human tragedy. She is eternal, an objective semi-goddess (daughter of Zeus and Leda), removed from the turmoil created by mortal beings, as is Oxford, greater than the humans who occupy the ancient realm, lasting and powerful, forever serene with continued ancient beauty, immortal. Helen, at the end of their story, gives Paris one final, somewhat ironic, gift.

"Paris, my bridegroom, happy and unknown
From Ida’s pleasant hill-slopes came;
I taught him love, and left him overthrown—
The world shall know his name." ("AM" stanza 37)

For his devotion to her, Helen gives immortality to the memory of Paris. Likewise, Oxford keeps careful record of her students, giving fame to them for their association and history with her. An immortality of sorts, accompanying the life-changing adventure, is given all those who enter through chance, design, or gift, the realms of the gods. They are changed. As Sayers reflects in \textit{Gaudy Night}, “There’s something about this place […] that alters all one’s values” (176).

In a similar vein, C.S. Lewis, through his exploration of the classical myth of Cupid and Psyche in his allegorical novel \textit{“Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold”} (1956), recalls the ancient story, first recorded by the Roman novelist Lucius Apuleius Madaurensis, in which figures a grand palace, an enchanted kingdom gifted to Psyche by Cupid (the god of the mountain) to keep her safe

\textsuperscript{25} “Achilles” in Sayers’s original manuscript (DLS MS-167. Leaves 6-24. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL). \textit{Pelides} is an alternate name for Achilles, the hero of Homer’s \textit{Iliad}, the son of Peleus and Thetis and slayer of Hector.
from harm and disaster. In this removed kingdom, Psyche and Cupid attempt to live, nightly, their romance for a short while under potentially disastrous conditions, as do, also, Helen and Paris (the shepherd-boy of the mountain) remain removed from harm for a time in their own gifted kingdom; and by further analogy, as Sayers and other students are protected temporarily in the beguiling, gifted, realm of Oxford, which, interestingly also serves as the object of desire, of enchantment. The mythic cycle is replayed through ancient and modern days, changing detail, changing circumstance, changing faces, but ever constant in its repeating message of mortal and immortal interaction through life-changing adventure, enchantment, and tragedy.

Interestingly, in Lewis’s retelling of the myth, mortals remain faceless until they act in truth and sincerity to their purpose in life (Lazo 22). Likewise, Paris is unknown, “faceless,” until he is singled out by Zeus and Aphrodite to partake in an immortal story which, for him, ends tragically but bestows upon him eternal recognition as he finally acts in accord with his life’s purpose. Paris is given an immortal face. Oxford’s student population remain somewhat faceless to the powers that be until they prove themselves. When they have so ‘proven’ to be worthy, they receive the immortal honor, the “face” of eternal association with the gods, the Oxford degree, the lambskin.

In her creation of the poem “Alma Mater,” Sayers was well aware of the timeless intricacies, as well as the eternal structure, of the story she set forth in her interpretation of the mythological romance. Furthermore, she was well aware of the consequences of partaking in an enchanted adventure and of accepting a godly gift. At Oxford, Sayers struggled also with self-awareness and with decisions that would point her toward her own purpose in life.

Sayers continues her interpretation of fated obsession in mythological romance as the story of Paris and Helen reaches its predicted end. Paris is killed, and Helen sets sail for Sparta, back to her family, with her son Idaeus. At this point in “Alma Mater,” the narrative poem changes focus. There is one transitional verse as Helen returns, imperturbably, to Menelaus after the ruin and death of Paris:

26 God-given conditions by Cupid (the invisible god of the mountain and Psyche’s husband) imposed upon Psyche which she unwillingly betrays by the machinations of her sister, Oural.

27 King of Sparta, first and constant husband of Helen. According to Greek mythology, Helen and Menelaus had only one daughter, Hermione. Sayers does not mention Hermione in “Alma Mater,” and Menelaus is mentioned briefly as “other arms and lips” (stanza 19) and as Idaeus’s host. To Sayers, only the opposing relationships of Paris and Idaeus are of significance to the Oxford allegory. Possibly Menelaus symbolizes England in “Alma Mater.”
Allegorical Reference to Oxford through Classical Myth in Sayer’s “Alma Mater”

But calm-eyed Helen, to her former home
Passed with the tall Achaean ships
Unheeding, over the unheeding foam,
To other arms and lips. (“AM” stanza 19)

Next, at the twentieth verse, Sayers introduces Idaeus by name, the grown son of Helen and Paris. The role of Helen within the poem is now changed from lover to mother, from object of amorous love to object of filial love. Her influence becomes a maternal, protective, affection as it is focused upon Idaeus, her son, and as he remembers and responds to her role, as divine mother, in his life.

“Helen, my mother, with the sea-deep eyes,
And brow unmarred by any fold,
Crowned with unending beauty Hera-wise
And everlasting gold;

“Helen, my mother whom I greatly love -
Nowise for that majestic grace,
The changeless beauty of the seed of Jove
Set godlike on thy face [...].” (“AM” stanzas 23-24)

Interestingly, the bulk of the poem, thirty-two verses, focuses upon the story of Idaeus and his relationship with Helen. To Sayers, this appeared to be the more relevant and critical bond, the one that survives. Oxford, as nurturing mother, has a far more satisfying relationship with her students. She is in loco parentis, in the role of a parent, protecting as well as overseeing their lives under her watchful eye, as they study and thrive in her hands. As fascinating as is the obsession with her beauty and power, the more nourishing is her role as caregiver, sending her youths out to the world as confident, informed, heroes and heroines rather than as doomed, anxious, paramours.

Helen is securely confident in her maternal role and interacts comfortably with Idaeus in their reunion when he, now a grown man, returns to Sparta from war. He, in turn, understands and sympathizes with her power over others and their reaction to her immortal beauty. However, to Idaeus, that obsession is foolishness compared to Helen’s maternal strengths; she is far more significant to him as mother.

“The songs men made, the tears men shed for thee,
The fire that vexed my father so—
A very foolishness they seem to me
That look on thee, and know
“Only thy mother-breast and gentle arms
  That wont to shield me from affright,
The voice that sang to quiet my alarms
  At the dread fall of night […].” (“AM” stanzas 25-26)

Still, there remains some tension between Helen and her grown son. He struggles to understand her divine nature, her inherent power over men. How can she be so removed, so remote, so objective, about her purpose? So does Oxford exist on a remote plane, always somewhat removed, by her raison d’être, from the lives and needs of those who love her and are nurtured by her. Helen, as demi-goddess, by her divine nature, is removed from the mundane. Oxford, by her very rationale for existence, is so removed as well. Helen attempts to explain the discrepancy to Idaeus:

“Comes love like mine upon the fretful heart,
  A strong refreshment to the soul;
Love that makes mad has only found a part,
  But I have known the whole.”

Then Helen, lifting up her eyes, wherein
  The secrets of the years held place,
Spake, looking seaward: “How shall I begin
  To show thee those old days?” (“AM” stanzas 32-33)

In this poem, Helen is immortal as Oxford is immortal. The enchantment that surrounds each may not be quantified or entirely understood by those gifted mortals who are but part of, or see only a portion of, the divine nature that is inherent to the existence of the divine. Those who love these immortals understand but a small fraction of their divine nature through that individual love. Only the immortals, themselves, with their infinite perspective, Helen as semi-deity and Oxford as sacred kingdom and imperturbable protectress, can understand or contain the whole.

Helen continues patiently to instruct Idaeus about her hypnotic power over, and effect upon, humanity through the essence of eternal beauty she embodies, that which evokes the most intense, overwhelming desire as well as the most profound of tragedies. She holds the well of divinatory power within her, as it emanates from the divine. She is man’s Promethean fire. Helen’s innate power can trigger prophecy, obsession, super-human strength of purpose, assure victory in war, offer otherworldly knowledge, turn hellish suffering into godlike beauty, and bestow immortal fame. She is the portal through which man’s greatness is achieved. Being so, she is the ultimate prize. Sayers’s analogy to Oxford of this divine power is clearly brought forth in the lines:
“I was begot by heaven out of earth,
Travail of earth and joy of heaven,
And in the slow unfolding of my birth
Came power; and I was given

“To man at length, to be a burning brand
And a Promethean fire to be,—
Look upon me, my son, and understand
Why men were slain for me.” (“AM” stanzas 35-36)

The mortals who associate with immortals share, in part, their divine story. Those mortals are given godly gifts, and sometimes curses, from their relationship with the divine. Paris, like the students and scholars of Oxford, attains a measure of fame through the association. “I taught him love, and left him overthrown— / The world shall know his name” (stanza 37). Furthermore, Helen knows full well the power of her irresistible influence over mortals, knowing, as well, that their obsession with her shall not cause regret. In fact, given a second chance and second choice, they would fall again under her spell. It is inevitable. By their gifted association with divine power, mortals have received a small glimpse of eternity, and they jealously protect the knowledge. They become greater humans for the experience, sometimes reaching for immortality themselves. This inevitable power to draw men toward the enchantment is also shared by Oxford University. Those under her spell do not regret the occurrence. That experience gives them a point of reference through their lives and strengthens them through life’s trials. So it was with Sayers and Dixey. They continued to return to the source of legendary power, Oxford University, through the course of their lives, even after their official going down ceremonies.

“If now the second time his choice were made
Of loveless peace and love-made woe,
Think’st thou the balance would be overweighed
And he would let love go?

“Nay, with each trembling moment of delight,
Each precious kiss and passionate,
Snatched, saved, and hoarded jealously, despite
Man’s wrath and heaven’s hate—

“Short glimpses of a glory that the years
Hold not in store for mortal men,
Although their eyes, strained through a mist of tears,
Behold it now and then—
“With these he never could be wholly sad
In his great, hallowed town of Troy
Where passion quickened and made him more than glad
With greater things than joy.

“Wonder not, therefore, that I have no tears
For those that loved me and are dead,
I garner up all the loves of all the years
A coronal for my head.” (“AM” stanzas 38-42)

Helen cautions Idaeus not to judge that which he does not understand. Having a demi-goddess as mother comes with certain inevitabilities, and in fact, is uncomfortably confusing at times. Her divine acts and decisions may not be understood by mortals, and only Zeus may judge the right and wrong effects of her inherent power. So it appears to be with Oxford University and its arcane mandates as well as decisions and laws that affect those under its influence. The University is greater than those mortals who occupy the kingdom and perform scholarly rituals within its boundaries. It is not for them to judge the enchantment but to learn from it, benefit from its gifts, and thus become greater human beings.

His mother continues to explain to Idaeus that only eternity rules them all within God’s thought, and so, even she may eventually die when time and chance have died. As such, she is a tool of Fate and is neither to be blamed nor is blameless for the destruction of Troy. As a device of Zeus, she must be protected. In like mind, Oxford is neither blamed nor blameless for the future of those who have chosen to receive her gifts. Oxford is subject ultimately to God, as Helen is subject ultimately to Zeus, and it is not for us, mere mortals, to know the workings of God’s mind. So Helen concludes her lesson to Idaeus.

“Then first, then only, judged and justified
By perfect working of God’s thought,
I too may die, when time and chance have died,
And pass away to naught;

28 God in this context refers ostensibly to Zeus, king of the Greek gods. However, it is interesting that Sayers capitalizes the title, “God,” which is characteristic when referring to the Christian Trinity, and always to the Creator, God the Father. In this context, one may hypothesize that Sayers was using, subtly, the title in double reference, a device she uses frequently in poetry.

29 In this case Almighty Creator, God the Father, so referred to within Sayers’s Anglican faith and throughout monotheistic Christian England.
“Not blamed, nor blameless, but the tool of fate,
   And seed of lovers unafraid,
Useless, when once they are regenerate
   Who made me, whom I made.

O Father Zeus, father of gods and men,
   That madest love and madest joy,
Set Helen in the citadel, and then
   Do what thou wilt with Troy!” (“AM” stanzas 47-48, 50)

With the setting of an eternal, unblinking, distant sun, Sayers ends the epic.

She spake and ceased. Idaeus, doubtfully,
   Leaning on that beloved breast
Smiled in her eyes, while over the dim sea
   The sun went down to rest. (“AM” stanza 51)

By deliberately placing at the beginning of OP. I. this strong narrative poem dealing clearly with other-worldly power, spell-bound obsession, romantic tragedy, enchantment, magical protection, and other ever-fascinating themes of divination and hubristic godly interference in the affairs of men, Sayers alerts her readers also to the importance of the immortal, mythical, other-worldly characteristics so symbolic to the enchanted kingdom of Oxford University, and as they are part of the Oxford experience. By use of allegory and poetic device, Oxford is anthropomorphized as the immortal enchantress, yet nurturing mother demi-goddess, Helen of Troy.

It is an amazingly strong statement and fascinating analogy that Sayers presents to her readers from the start. Despite Sayers’s overtly casual attitude when describing the creation of OP. I., she is very sure of her design, formation, composition, and of the route she will use to lead us through this carefully built collection of poetry. Even as a young writer, Sayers begins to show the gift for clear, yet subtle, organized construction leading to unexpected jewels found in the edifice that becomes an inherent characteristic of her later writing, fiction, and prose. Sayers never does anything in half-measure, this collection included. When she writes poetry or prose, it is always with full steam ahead; she is sure of her poetic architecture. In OP. I., she is building from the strong foundation of knowledge and experience, a jewel-filled structure of mythically themed poetry.

There are a number of mortal and immortal characters who contribute to the epic story of “Alma Mater.” Helen is the heroine and semi-divine enchantress, both hypnotic lover and nurturing mother. Helen is Oxford
University, anthropomorphized. However, she is not ultimately in control. She is subject to the decisions and power of Aphrodite, full deity, Goddess of Love, who controls Helen’s fate. Furthermore, Helen is subject to Zeus, her father, his hall of judgment, and, even more so, to “Time the Titan,” under whom they are all subject, and to “young Eternity, his ward.”

“High o’er the cloud blue arches, and the dome
Of those celestial palaces
Where age-long Zeus built up his mighty home,
The hall of judgment is.

“There Time the Titan ceaselessly doth guard,
With leaden and relentless mace,
The sleep of young Eternity, his ward,
The last of Saturn’s race;

“Who when he wakes, to his full stature grown,
And lays his hand upon the door,
Almighty Zeus shall shudder from his throne,
And Time shall be no more […]” (“AM” stanzas 43-45)

So is Oxford, despite her prodigious power to enchant, not entirely in control. Her existence is dependent upon the higher powers of the Crown (Zeus), those who bestow favors (the Aphrodites of funding), and, ultimately, of course upon history, relentless time, and eternity. Menelaus is Helen’s distant yet firmly patient and primary husband. Perhaps he is, in a sense, England, forever ‘married’ to Oxford in unbreakable bond.

Both Paris and Idaeus represent the two ends of the student, scholar, and faculty spectrum, most of those falling between the two extremes. Paris represents those who are gifted with Oxford and hypnotized by her, falling entirely under her spell for a period of time. Sayers felt initially the mesmerizing pull of Oxford and promptly fell in love with the university. Sayers, in part, identifies with Paris.

Idaeus, on the other hand, is Helen’s protected progeny who is far more comfortable with Helen’s maternal role. He believes spell-binding hypnosis is foolish. So does Sayers (as does Dixey) identify as well with Idaeus, in that Oxford University as nurturing teacher within a seemingly-magical, protective, kingdom is acknowledged by them to be the more satisfying, and ultimately, the more practical role for Oxford. Sayers is able, in time, to distance herself from the spell of Oxford and respond to the university’s more practical self, that of learning environment, which, at times can be questioned, as Idaeus is not mesmerized by Helen, and, at times, even doubts her.
In essence, Sayers is both Paris and Idaeus to Oxford’s Helen. This dual role is developed in “Alma Mater” with Sayers’s quintessential subtlety, and, may I add, lovely indirect humor. Nothing is superfluous in the structure of OP. I. or placed there in frivolity or in error. It has all been thought out carefully by Sayers and we should approach this small book of poems as a well-built window to her extraordinary life at Oxford University, with all of its pageantry, myth, spell-binding experience, heroes, heroines, magicians, and eternally flowing fountains of knowledge. By writing and structuring this book around myth and legend, Sayers offered us, her readers, entrée to her enchanted university world. It is a gift.

After “Alma Mater,” the classical analogy quickly changes to a flavor of medieval symbolism and later to Christian romanticism. Yet throughout the rest of OP. I., we are reminded of “Alma Mater” and the allegory of the classical myth as it resurfaces periodically within subsequent poems, to the end of the book. Directly following the allegorical “Alma Mater,” Sayers places “Lay,” a metrically interlaced series of twelve poems, where allegorical reference to Oxford University is strengthened and included in each of the twelve individual poems. In this second poem and its individual parts, Sayers shifts the allegory from classical myth to medieval symbolism syncretized with Christian romanticism. Yet even within the shift, we find cohesive references to the world of classical allegory.

In “Lay,” section “II,” Sayers briefly shadows her previous classical analogy from “Alma Mater” when she references Oxford, keeping the links intact. The pronoun “Thou” refers to Oxford, as does “a city sanctified,” as Sayers compares Oxford to the great ancient realms of Thebes, On, and Memphis. However, Sayers begins now to shift from classical myth to medieval symbolism and continues so through most of the poems, melding classical with medieval analogy. As it occurs at this point in OP. I., the syncretism is between the analogies pertinent to narrative myth and the romantic analogies inherent to the medieval ballad.

Even as she turns her attention away from classical myth in later poems of the book, Sayers continues to remind us of her dual Paris/Idaeus identity, by the lines:

II.
Oxford! suffer it once again that another should do thee wrong,
I also, I above all, should set thee into a song;
I that am twice thy child have known thee, worshipped thee, loved thee, cried
Thy name aloud to the silence and could not be satisfied,
Bear with me as thou hast borne with all thy passionate throng
Of lovers, the fools of love; for the great flood sweeps along
From the hills into the sea, and all their boats go down with the tide;
And thou shalt stand unmoved, when the wreck of the world beside,
When the loveless cities of greed slip down in their ruined pride
And crumble into the gulf of Time. Thou shalt be strong
With Thebes and On and Memphis, where the deathless gods abide,
A city sanctified. (OP “Lay” II)

The next internal poem of “Lay,” titled “III,” continues to entwine ancient myth, reminding us of Ulysses (“He slips / To seaward, […]”) by including several tantalizing hints of scenes from The Odyssey, with the devices of medieval enchantment and magical imagery:

III.
If I shall sing of thee in antique rime,
    Stately and cold as moons that near eclipse,
And intricate as bells rung down in time,
    It is to keep the madness from my lips,
Whereby the lover’s tongue stumbles and trips,
Uttering foolishness, and thy sublime
    White brow30 is marked with mockery—garlands to whips,
Sceptres to reeds are turned, and worship to a crime.

Think, magic city, that as each dear chime
    Thrills the mute, friendless night, or stealthily drips
Through all the noise of noon from prime to prime,
    Continually some new soul comes to grips
With thee and all the power of thee. He slips
To seaward, weighs out anchor from the slime,
    Following the wake of countless golden ships,
Thy figure at the prow, to some far western clime.
    (OP “Lay” III)

With these lines, however, Sayers concludes her direct references to classical myth, but continues with medieval allegories to Oxford University until the final selection, “Last Morning in Oxford.” Within the verses of this last poem, we are brought full circle round to the primal enchantment of Greek mythology. Sayers ends the collection of poems in OP. I. as she began, in the ancient Hellenic other-

30 Compare “thy sublime white brow” referring to Oxford, to “brow unmarred by any fold” referring to Helen in “Alma Mater” (stanza 23).
world of heroes and gods, tying up neatly her main theme of adventure experienced. Further, she closes the book as Homer would, with no definitive ending. Her epigraph for “Last Morning” clearly states her deliberate purpose to end with a detail, a non-ending, as Homer’s epics so do:

“The great poets . . . . are not at the pains of devising careful endings. Thus, Homer ends with lines that might as well be in the middle of a passage.” – H. Belloc. (“Last Morning”)

Adhering to this epigraph, Sayers brings us to the end of the enchanted adventure with no definite closure, but a valediction (Coomes 60). Again, I believe this is a subtle and deliberately applied device. First, her experience with Oxford is not ending. She does not intend to close the doors permanently, and this is indeed borne out by her repeated returns to Oxford after going down in June 1915. Secondly, she does not receive an official university degree, a definitive statement of academic closure, until June 1920. To that point, her student experience remains unfinished. The ‘going down’ ceremony for Somerville in 1915 is impressive, but is, in the end, essentially a ritual intended to validate the completion of study, but not to extend an official acknowledgment of “face.” Thirdly, disaster continues to loom over Oxford and her student adventurers during World War I. They are all in hiatus, with Sayers’s final words symbolizing the overall sense of things left hanging.

Finally, as hinted by the title, OP. I., Sayers may have meant this book to be the first, with others to follow, possibly continuing the themes begun in this initial collection. It was to be book one in a series, or poetry cycle, possibly of her life as it unfolded. Thus, to finish her first poetry collection about the enchanted world of Oxford and the potential tragedy looming over the kingdom resulting in its possible disappearance, Sayers turns to the device used by ancient sources to connote incompleteness, to reveal the eternalness of the immortal story, and that device is simply not to end the story, but to close in foreshadowing, a feature of classical myth also noted by Lewis (Macky 77).

I do not think that very much was said
Of solemn requiem for the good years dead.

Like Homer, with no thunderous rhapsody,
I closed the volume of my Odyssey.

---

31 The foreshadowing, in Sayers’s case, is of a later return to the poetry of supernatural allegory in Sayers’s translation of Dante’s Divine Comedy during the last years of her life. She ended by writing as she began, focused upon classical myth, medieval romance, and Christian symbolism within the realm of poetry.
The thing that I remember most of all
Is the white hemlock by the garden wall.

June 23rd, 1915. (OP. I. 71)

Still, when considering the totality of *OP. I.*, a reader is struck, despite the unusual ending, with an awareness of some closure, as in the ending of a chapter. This sense of entirety is brought about, partly, by Sayers’s careful structuring of the book to complete a circle, starting with an introduction to the theme of adventure within Greek mythology, through allusions to Oxford University by analogy and allegory to heroic legendary figures and motifs of enchantment, finally to the completing of the cycle as she acknowledges Oxford’s mythic nature and bids adieu to that enchanted kingdom of a university to begin another adventure.

Therefore, God love thee, thou enchanted town,
   God love thee, leave me, clutch me not so fast;
   Lest, clinging blindly we but grope aghast,
   Sweet friends, go hence and seek your own renown,
   Now that we have gone down—have all gone down.
   (“To M.J.”)

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

In this paper, I have attempted to bring into focus Dorothy L. Sayers’s knowledge and proficiency with a genre in which she is not generally acknowledged to be adroit or interested, that of writing original poetry, using allegories of classical myth and legend.

My intent was twofold: first, to direct attention toward the poetry written by Sayers based upon her experiences and observations during her Oxford years, particularly to that of Sayers’s first book of poetry, *OP. I.*, as it is a valuable portion of her literary heritage, and secondly, to direct attention toward a seldom recognized interest of hers in the worlds of classical mythology, legend, and fantasy, as well as in the allegorical devices inherent to those worlds which she explored within the sphere of poetry, particularly in her early published work, *OP. I.*

Sayers was first and foremost a poet in her early adult writing life, and indeed, in her own opinion. Despite the continued lack of critical acclaim given her poetry, that same poetry can be considered a valuable key to the expansive imagination and structured thought of Sayers. Furthermore, she is not often considered, if ever, to be a writer of myth or other-worldly themed literature, but, indeed, she dealt extensively with fantasy, folklore, and legend through her
poetry, and most clearly through her early poetry, as evidenced in *OP. I.*, her first book.

Poetic and epic themes of classical mythology, medieval legend, and magical other-worlds permeated Sayers’ young adult writing life as part of her student experience at Oxford University. Clearly, Oxford was never considered by Sayers to be a Christian ‘Heaven,’ Sayers being all too aware of the vicissitudes of the academic realm. However, Oxford University was Sayers’s own early twentieth century mythic kingdom, where the perfidious gods and goddesses of academia directed the lives of mortal students who had been invited into that legendary world and were given a chance, in turn, for immortality. Some, like Paris, eventually perished. Some, like Idaeus, were nurtured and achieved a measure of the immortality associated with their *Alma Mater*. All, however, who had the fortune or misfortune to interact with the ruling gods and goddesses remembered the experience and were remembered in turn: “The world shall know his name” (stanza 37).

Tellingly, Sayers had both academic experiences. She chose to leave Oxford University rather than to continue her studies on a more advanced level, despite encouragement from her parents and faculty to stay. Yet she was rewarded also, in 1920, with two official Oxford degrees, achieving a “face” and cementing her eternal association with that university.

“Comes love like mine upon the fretful heart,
A strong refreshment to the soul;
Love that makes mad has only found a part,
But I have known the whole.” (“AM” stanza 32)

Several years later, in 1919, Sayers encapsulated, by these words, the reasons for her discontent with the removed, other-worldly, atmosphere of academia:

*Solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*32 And, indeed, Academe does recognize the governing principles of life, in theory and for examination purposes, as it does anything else that can be found in a book. But it prefers not to recognize them in every-day life. (Sayers, “Eros in Academe” 112-113)

Sayers’s decision to leave Oxford University rather than to continue studies on a more advanced level had, at its base, her desire to move forward into the reality of the everyday world. Sayers chose, ultimately, to live in the urban environment of London from the mid 1920’s, but Oxford retained its hold

---

32 “(where) they make a desert, they call it peace.” From Tacitus, *De Vita et Moribus Iulii Agricolae*, ch. 30. (*De Vita* 20).
over her thought. This hold is evidenced, in one example, by her Oxford-based mystery novel, *Gaudy Night*, through which, Sayers, as author, struggled still with the perplexities of life within and without academia. Finally, Sayers returned in spirit and in work to her first loves of poetry, classical mythology, and medieval translation as she involved herself once again in legendary other-worlds, this time in those of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*.

I believe it is time to expand our consideration of the imaginative world of Dorothy L. Sayers, to include analyses of those themes of myth and legend as well as those allegorical devices that Sayers embraced in her early writing life, and to which she returned in her later, more seasoned, professional career, particularly with respect to her translation of *La Divina Commedia* by Dante Alighieri, a quintessential example of medieval allegorical verse dealing with supernatural other-worlds. By choosing to focus upon Dante in her later years, Sayers returned to her first loves of poetry and translation, completing full circle her interest in writing poems of mythic allegory, medieval romance, and Christian symbolism which she began as a young poet and in which she delved with enthusiasm during her Oxford University years.

Sayers was an author of much experience, wonderful imagination, skilled knowledge, and wry wit. Clearly, she explored, as part of her poetic student experience and imagination, those ancient stories and devices of enchantment and romance inherent to classical mythology and medieval legend. Sayers’s adventures in those worlds were traversed primarily through her own imaginative fantasy poetry written during the era of her formative literary years and within or near Sayers’s own legendary kingdom of Oxford University, her Alma Mater.

For all things merry, quaint and strange
For sound and silence, strength and change,
And last, for death, which only gives
Value to every thing that lives;

........................................

Also that, being not too wise
To do things foolish in men’s eyes,
I gained experience by this,
And saw life somewhat as it is.

("Hymn in Contemplation of Sudden Death” stanzas 8, 4)\(^{33}\)

\(^{33}\) “Hymn in Contemplation of Sudden Death” is the ninth titled poem of *OP. I.*
Allegorical Reference to Oxford through Classical Myth in Sayer’s “Alma Mater”

WORKS CITED


__ __. “Godolphin Poems.” Ms. Folder DLS MS-365. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL.


__ __. “Notebook, 1914-1915.” Ms. Folder DLS MS-167. Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton, IL.


70 ☼ *Mythlore* 132, Spring/Summer 2018
Barbara Prescott


**Barbara Prescott** is an independent scholar, literary anthropologist, educational researcher, and sometime poet. She holds graduate degrees from the University of Illinois and University of Wisconsin, and is an alumna of Stanford University. Currently studying the poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers, she is writing the results of her research in a forthcoming book, *Lyric Muse: The Oxford Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*. She has published articles in various academic journals: *The Stanford Forum for Research on Language Issues, Proceedings of the International Congress of Linguists, Child Language, and Inklings Forever: Proceedings of the Colloquium on C.S. Lewis and Friends*. She is the editor of SONNET, a Journal of Poetry. Her published collections of poetry include *Anthesis: Sonnets from the Stanford Years 1983-87, Balance: Sonnets of Chicago, Anaglyph: Sonnets of Variance,* and *Eyes of Rain: Poems of San Francisco*. 
Mythopoeic Press

Books by and about writers of mythopoeic and fantastic literature

The Mythopoeic Society Press publishes material by and about writers of mythopoeic and fantastic literature. Our publication projects primarily involve works related to the Inklings, as well as those who influenced or who were influenced by their work. Works previously published or being considered for future projects include out-of-print materials, collections of short articles and essays, and other scholarly items.

**Baptism of Fire: The Birth of the Modern British Fantastic in World War I** • $19.95
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft
Available in print and Kindle from Amazon.com; other ebook versions from Smashwords.com.
World War I has been called “the poets’ war,” as it was characterized by a massive outpouring of works of literature during and after the war. Much of this literary harvest, as Paul Fussell brilliantly demonstrated in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, hinged on an ironic response to the deadly absurdities of World War I. Yet, Fussell also acknowledges that fantasy could be a legitimate literary response to the war, a way of transforming the horrible experiences of the war into something more bearable, applicable, and relevant; into myth and “Escape” in the sense that Tolkien used the term in “On Fairy-stories.” This volume examines selected examples of the fantastic response to World War I among British authors.

**Perilous and Fair: Women in the Works and Life of J. R. R. Tolkien** • $19.95
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Leslie A. Donovan
Available in print and Kindle from Amazon.com; other ebook versions from Smashwords.com.
Since the earliest scholarship on *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion*, critics have discussed how the works of J. R. R. Tolkien seem either to ignore women or to place them on unattainable pedestals. To remedy such claims that Tolkien’s fiction has nothing useful or modern to say about women, *Perilous and Fair* focuses attention on views that interpret women in Tolkien’s works and life as enacting essential, rather than merely supportive roles.

**Intersection of Fantasy & Native America: From H. P. Lovecraft to Leslie Marmon Silko** • $23.00
Available in print from Amazon.com.
Edited by Amy H. Sturgis and David D. Oberhelman (2009)

**Past Watchful Dragons: Fantasy and Faith in the World of C. S. Lewis** • $20.00
Available in print from Amazon.com.
Edited by Amy H. Sturgis and Preface by Darrell Gwaltney (2007)

**Tolkien on Film: Essays on Peter Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings** • $19.95
Available in print from Amazon.com.
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft (2005)

**The Pelant and the Shuffly** by John Bellairs • $9.00
Available in print from Amazon.com.
Illustrated by Marilynn Fitch and Foreword by Brad Strickland (2001)

**The Masques of Amun House** by Charles Williams • $16.00
Available in print from Amazon.com.
Edited by David Bratman (2000)

**Chad Walsh Reviews C.S. Lewis** • $4.95
Available in print from Amazon.com.
(1998)

**Mythlore Index Plus** • Free downloadable PDF file from www.mythlore.org
Edited by Janet Brennan Croft and Edith Crowe, with Artwork by Tim Kirk and Sarah Beach
Available as a fully searchable digital file downloadable in PDF format, *Mythlore Index Plus* not only covers all issues of Mythlore, but includes all articles and reviews published in the *Tolkien Journal* (now out of print), several Mythcon Conference Proceedings, and the Mythopoeic Press Essay Collections.