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Tolkien, Sayers, Sex and Gender

David Doughan

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Tolkien, Sayers, Sex and Gender

Abstract

Tolkien's expressed "loathing" for Dorothy Sayers and her novels *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon* is remarkable considering that Sayers is generally considered to belong to the same milieu as the Inklings. Possible reasons for this are the contrast between the orthodox Catholic Tolkien's view of male sexuality as inherently sinful, requiring "great mortification", and Sayers's frankly hedonistic approach. Another reason may be Sayers's depiction of an independent Oxford women's college getting by successfully without men, and her representation of marriage as a source of intellectual frustration for creative women.

Additional Keywords

Gender; Oxford; Dorothy L. Sayers; Sex; Sin

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Keywords: Gender, Oxford, Dorothy L. Sayers, Sex, Sin

I could not stand *Gaudy Night*. I followed P. Wimsey from his attractive beginnings so far, by which time I conceived a loathing for him (and his creatrix) not surpassed by any other character in literature known to me, unless by his Harriet. The honeymoon one (Busman's H.?) was worse. I was sick
(Tolkien, 1981, p. 82, letter no. 71)

Dorothy Leigh Sayers is occasionally referred to as being a sort of honorary Inklings¹. She certainly was in frequent correspondence with both C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams, and the writings of the latter especially influenced her to begin her translation of Dante's *Commedia*. So such an expression of distaste by a potential sympathiser is somewhat remarkable. The reasons for this have never been explicitly stated, but certain marked differences of style and emphasis (to say nothing of taste) have already been pointed out (Vink, 1990, p. 43) – Sayers's Anglicanism, her French studies, her involvement in and writing of drama, and her enthusiasm for Dante. However, none of this applies directly to the above quotation, which is concerned with Sayers's popular detective fiction featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, and especially the two novels *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon*. Tolkien was certainly far from averse to what is nowadays known as "genre" fiction, such as science fiction and crime stories, and initially he obviously found Wimsey an appealing character. What might have changed his view?

Personal antipathy can probably be ruled out, since Tolkien and Sayers most likely never met, at least in the belief of C.S. Lewis (1988, p. 481). Lewis himself knew and corresponded with her in a fairly friendly fashion, though he too disliked *Gaudy Night* (Carpenter, 1978, p. 189). As already mentioned, her acquaintanceship and correspondence with Charles Williams was far more extensive. They shared a similarity of outlook in many ways; indeed, parts of *Murder must advertise* (the least "realistic" of the Wimsey novels) almost read like a Williams story. Thus, Tolkien's distinctly

wary attitude towards Williams might suggest a certain mistrust of his associates. However, not only does this not explain the strength of Tolkien's objection, but it does not take into account the fact that it was inspired by two in particular of the Wimsey books.

Lord Peter Wimsey is a preposterous creation, even by the standards of romantic crime fiction. Sayers, who mainly earned her living from him, created him with a shrewd calculation of the qualities that a gentleman sleuth should possess. He is in a position to work closely with the police: Inspector Charles Parker is not only a personal friend, but eventually marries Wimsey's sister. In detective stories generally, the tedious business of calling in expert opinions in support of plot details can hold up the narrative; therefore, to obviate the necessity of involving outsiders, Wimsey is made to be a gifted amateur criminologist. He also speaks half-a-dozen languages fluently, is an expert bibliophile, a virtuoso pianist, a brilliant cricketer, a *fin gourmet* and a connoisseur of wine, women and song. His wealth and leisure enable him to drop everything in order to dash round the world, if need be, in search of a vital piece of evidence. He speaks with kings, yet, when necessary, has the common touch, is highly proficient at physical combat, and has a shining war record. In short, "he was to show from the beginning what God could have done if only He'd had the money" (Heilbrun in Sandoe 1972, p. 462).

Sayers's relationship with her money-spinning hero is somewhat ambivalent. She certainly referred to the Wimsey novels as mere potboilers, and when she seemed to have earned enough from Lord Peter to concentrate on other matters, she prepared to marry him off – which is why he so unaccountably falls for Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison*. However, at this point she suffered a severe financial downturn, which meant that the Wimsey hymenaeals would have to be postponed until his author had seen off the creditors. As already indicated, Lord Peter does indeed have

¹ For one example out of many, see Brabazon, 1981, p. 235.

many hallmarks of a cynical commercial formulation; also, he is to a large extent a conscious parody, with something of Wodehouse's Bertie Wooster (comparisons between their respective impeccable menservants are illuminating), but rather more of Max Beerbohm's Duke of Dorset in *Zuleika Dobson*. However, this is by no means all there is to him. One of the qualities for which Sayers consciously strove was that his character should be capable of development; "this she certainly accomplished even if the change from the Wooster-like, monocled, man-about-Town of *Whose body?* to the sensitive guilt-oppressed scholar sobbing in his wife's lap at the end of *Busman's honeymoon* is less a development than a metamorphosis" (James in Brabazon, 1981, p. xiv) – though even as early as *Whose body?* he is already consulting psychiatrists about war-generated neuroses. Certainly over the years he becomes less of a two-dimensional parody and more of a wish-fulfilment fantasy of his creatrix's ideal man – and lover.

Of course, this could be one reason for Tolkien's growing aversion. Wimsey's increasingly un-"masculine" and often neurotic sensitivity might well have tried the patience of one who had actually been through the War, and caused him to wonder ever more testily, for example, why one who was so riven by guilt over the death penalty should be so zealous in seeking out candidates for it. Still, this by itself would hardly explain the strength of his reaction – and other more likely explanations are not far to seek; for example, in Tolkien's ideas about women.

Tolkien believed that women:

are instinctively, when uncorrupt, monogamous. *Men are not* No good pretending. Men just ain't, not by their animal nature. Monogamy [. . .] is for us men a piece of 'revealed' ethic, according to faith and not to the flesh [. . .]. It is a fallen world, and there is no consonance between our bodies, minds and souls.

However, the essence of a *fallen* world is that the *best* cannot be attained by free enjoyment, or by what is called 'self-realization' (usually a nice name for self-indulgence, wholly inimical to the realization of other selves); but by denial, by suffering. Faithfulness in Christian marriage entails that: great mortification. Marriage may help to sanctify & direct to its proper object his sexual desires [. . .] but [. . .] it will not satisfy him – as hunger may be kept off by regular meals. It will offer as many difficulties to the purity proper to that state, as it provides easements.

(Tolkien, 1981, p. 51)

Sayers, being a woman herself, had somewhat different ideas on sexuality, especially the male variety, and she regaled Charles Williams with some of them in a "discourse upon BEDWORTHINESS", in the course of which she asserted that "on the strength of his literary output alone . . . any woman of sense would decline to tackle D.H. Lawrence at £1,000 a night", before setting forth "the distinguishing marks of True Bedworthiness in the Male",

which she found:

to consist in the presence of Three Grand Assumptions . . . :

1. That the primary aim and object of Bed is that a good time should be had *by all*.

2. That (other things being equal) it is the business of the Male to make it so.

3. That he knows his business.

The first Assumption rules out at once all . . . sadists, connoisseurs in rape, egotists, and superstitious believers in female reluctance, as well as Catholic (replenish-the-earth) utilitarians and stockbreeders.

The second Assumption rules out the hasty, the clumsy [. . .], the untimely and (in most cases) the *routinier* – though one would not wish to be too hard on Mr. Shandy, senior, since Mrs. Shandy may have been as orderly-minded as himself and possibly preferred it that way – and those . . . who are without skill in the management of bed-furniture or wind the whole combination into toppling and insecure complications of pillows and blankets or (in extreme circumstances) bang their partner's head against the wall . . .

(Letter of 18.10.1944 to Charles Williams, quoted in Brabazon, 1981, p. 112)

This view of male sexuality is a very long way indeed from "great mortification", which is not a concept which ever seems to have occurred to Lord Peter. His omnicompetence is indicated with increasing explicitness in the later books to extend to the bedroom – above all in *Busman's Honeymoon*, where not only is it clear that neither of the newlyweds are virgins, but where the reader is treated to a moderately suggestive (by 1937 standards of commercial fiction) epithalamium. Any question of Lord Peter's sexual experience had indeed already been conclusively settled in the biographical addendum to *Gaudy Night*, where his ageing but nonetheless dissolute Uncle Paul Delagardie related how he had taken his charge's sentimental education in hand: ". . . at the age of seventeen, Peter came to see me of his own accord. He was old for his age, and eminently reasonable, and I treated him as a man of the world. I established him in trustworthy hands in Paris, instructing him to keep his affairs upon a sound business footing and to see that they terminated with goodwill on both sides and generosity on his. He fully justified my confidence. I believe that no woman has ever found cause to complain of Peter's treatment; and two at least of them have since married royalties (rather obscure royalties, I admit, but royalty of a sort)[. . . H]owever good the material one has to work on, it is ridiculous to leave any young man's social education to chance" (Sayers, 1970, pp. 442-3).

This is moderately hot stuff for the time; for example, Queenie Leavis, that great fan of D.H. Lawrence and all his works, revealingly found that Sayers's "deliberate indecency is not shocking or amusing, it is odious merely as so much Restoration Comedy is" (Leavis, 1937, p. 336)². Indeed, as

² Incidentally, it is interesting that the chief reason Leavis gives for denouncing *Gaudy Night* is its approval of a supposedly sterile academic way of working, the kind of scholarship that "never gears in with life". Her biggest denunciation is that of the "philological" approach: her final contemptuous dismissal of Sayers reads: "Miss Sayers, who might evidently have been an academic herself, is probably

distinct from the equally amorous heroes of D.H. Lawrence, Lord Peter's attitude to sex was not a matter of literary principle but of aesthetic pleasure, comparable with a discerning taste for good wine and incunables. The devoutly Catholic Tolkien was even less likely than D.H. Lawrence or Q.D. Leavis to put sex in the same category as a Dow '96 or a Wynkyn de Worde, and it can easily be imagined that Sayers's frankly hedonistic attitude towards it would indeed "make him sick". He certainly would have been likely to put it in the category of "self indulgence", if nothing worse.

And yet, Tolkien's original objection was to *Gaudy Night*. Disregarding the appended epilogue referred to above, there is little or nothing of the "sexually libertine" in this work which might have offended his ascetic Catholic sensibilities. What then was it that provoked his especial antipathy to this particular work, "and its creatrix"? An examination of some of the themes of *Gaudy Night* may illuminate this point.

First, locations. Sayers is usually very precise with her locations. At the beginning of *Gaudy Night*, when Harriet Vane is looking out over Mecklenburgh Square, WC1, her perspective may well be that of a room in London House, a sort of hostel for transatlantic academics, and at that time an entirely male establishment. Malice is frequently afthought in her choice of locations; when Harriet eventually marries Lord Peter, their London pied-à-terre is at No.2 Audley Square, then and now the address of the very posh (but chronically hard-up) University Women's Club. And, only a few years after Virginia Woolf was shooed off a Cambridge quadrangle by an outraged Beadle (Woolf, 1929, p. 9) for being of the Wrong Gender, Sayers, in a mock-apologetic Author's Note to *Gaudy Night*, boasts of planting her idealised version of Somerville College upon the "spacious and sacred cricket ground" of Balliol College, the *sanctum sanctorum* of the male academic Establishment, and the English upper classes in general (Sayers, 1970, p. 6). In fine, this is a very pointed instance of claiming an egregiously male space for women, and it immediately establishes a theme which runs throughout the novel. Its location is certainly very different from the exclusively male Clubland of the earliest Wimsey books – the bachelor (or pseudo-bachelor) world inhabited by the characters of Haggard, Chesterton and Graham, for example, to say nothing of the all-male ambience of the Notion Club.

We may well disregard the location of Shrewsbury College as being merely a red rag (of one sort or another) waved at various Oxonian bulls – but Tolkien was subtler than to charge directly. His own attitudes to women and learning do, indeed seem to have been rather mixed; he certainly had female students, none of whom seem to have accused him of sexual discrimination. However, his own expressed views were that "it is [women's] gift to be receptive, stimulated, fertilized (in many other matters than the physical) by the male. Every teacher knows that. How quickly an intelligent woman can be taught, grasp his ideas, see his point – and how (with rare exceptions) they can go no further, when they leave his hand, or when they cease to take a *personal* interest

in him." (Tolkien, 1981, p. 49, no. 43). Sayers's attitude, again like that of most prominent Somervilleans, is somewhat at odds with this conception of female nature. *Gaudy Night*, among other things, depicts a women's college full of female dons who are as eccentric, as querulous, as antipathetic *and* as scholarly as any fictional depiction of male dons (for example, compare the SCR at Shrewsbury with the SCR at Bracton in C.S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* – I aver that the former is a far more sympathetic, and probably a more scholarly, company). Meanwhile, the female students are shown to be about as silly as male students – no less, no more. Most of the action takes place in an Oxford college in which it is *men* who are the outsiders, either as visitors or as servants – the reverse of the conventional situation. Furthermore, most of the women academics portrayed in *Gaudy Night* appear as fulfilled as most men; indeed, the subversive dénouement reveals that the twisted culprit turns out to be not a frustrated lesbian academic but a "decent" wife and mother who is Standing By Her Man – and earlier, the most frustrated and disappointed of the returning Old Girls, Harriet Vane's contemporaries, is again the one among them who has tried to follow the conventional married rôle as delineated by Tolkien in Letter number 43. The final stages of Wimsey's courtship are shown to involve a danger for Harriet Vane: that in marriage she would be diminished as her fellow-alumna has been diminished, and excluded from the life of the mind – something which may have found uncomfortable resonances with Tolkien's own home life. And despite the fact that it is Lord Peter who has finally to be called in to unravel the mystery, the overall impression left is that of a self-sufficient community of women who in the main are doing very nicely without men, thank you. The men who work in the college are obviously uncomfortable with their rôle, to the extent of approving of 'Itler's measures to "keep the girls at home" (Sayers, 1970, p. 114), and the young men who stray in (Saint George, Pomfret) are depicted as being immature, silly and spoilt (albeit charming). How Tolkien might have taken this we may gather from the tale of *Aldarion and Erendis*, where his disapproval of the early all-woman education of Ancalimë is evident. In this attitude he was far from alone, and far from extreme – and, as has been shown recently, Oxford still does as much as it can to undermine autonomous women's colleges, by means already outlined by both Woolf and Sayers: money. The heavily pointed contrast between the plain living at Shrewsbury and the everyday luxury of menus at The House would probably not be welcomed by male academics then or now, though the continuing difference has recently been underlined by the final capitulation of Somerville under financial pressure. Dorothy, thou shouldst be living in this hour / Somerville hath need of thee.

Of course, the question of single-sex versus mixed colleges is a fraught and complex one, as is any question to do with sexuality or gender. Although in general I find Sayers's sentiments closer to my own, even so I should like to say that

I do not claim that Sayers had got these issues completely right, while Tolkien was absolutely wrong. As usual, the issue is more complicated than that. As I have mentioned, there is no record of Tolkien being anything but helpful to his women students, some of whom have gone on to be among his greatest admirers. There remains, however, the strength of Tolkien's stated objection to Sayers, which does not altogether seem to be justified even by the foregoing. I suspect that it may be another example of Tolkien making extravagant statements about his dislikes which, when challenged, he would at least seriously modify, if not retract altogether – for example, the case of Dante; and his well-advertised loathing of France and all things French blatantly did not prevent him from knowing a good Burgundy when he saw it (Tolkien, 1981, p. 405, no. 317). So he may have in this instance also intemperately overstated his case. However, on these issues Tolkien and Sayers were at least

theoretically a long way apart in ways which have some significance for us now and here, in Oxford in 1992.

Afterword

This paper was presented in a session together with Lisa Hopkins's paper on Tolkien's heroines, which amply demonstrates that in his "sub-creation" Tolkien was far from averse to depicting positively strong, resourceful and independent women (if not in any great numbers). A fuller account of Tolkien's attitudes to sex and gender should take into account not only the above, but also the pertinent observation made by Len Sanford that both Sayers and Tolkien accept unquestioningly the "rampant" model of innate male sexuality. For further enlightenment on this topic I recommend Lesley Hall's *Hidden anxieties* (Polity, 1991), a study of attitudes to male sexuality in the early 20th century.

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