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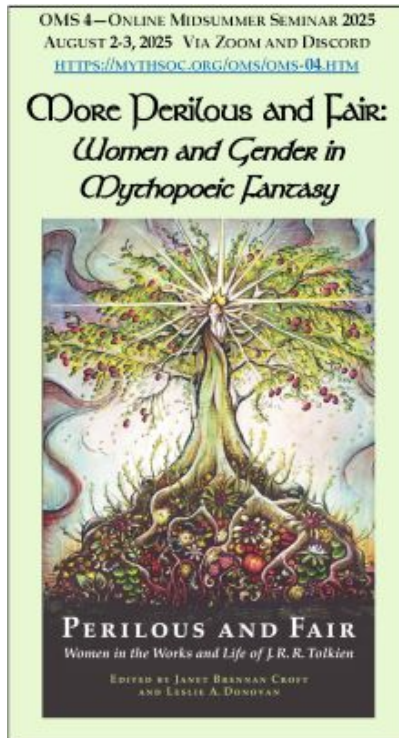
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A Ring of Good Bells: Providence and Judgement in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*

Abstract

Analyzes the action of Providence in *The Nine Tailors* to bring about retributive justice. Sees the novel as an expression of Sayers's views on the creative process of the Christian artist.

Additional Keywords

Justice in *The Nine Tailors*; Providence in *The Nine Tailors*; Sayers, Dorothy L.—Views on the creative process; Sayers, Dorothy L. *The Nine Tailors*

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A Ring of Good Bells

Providence and Judgment in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Nine Tailors*

Nancy-Lou PATTERSON

A gatha Christie wrote one detective novel in which the murderer was the narrator, and one play in which he was the detective. In a sense, *The Nine Tailors* falls into the latter category, but in another sense, Dorothy L. Sayers takes the blame one step higher. The ultimate cause of death in this novel, which some would claim as her finest, is God.

Appropriately to such an august and dismaying subject, the book begins with an accident; by the third sentence the word "accident" has been uttered: "Peering through a flurry of driving flakes, Wimsey saw how the accident had come about."¹ An "accident," we note, must have a cause. His car has gone "nose deep in the ditch" on a New Year's Eve, and equally deep in the fen country. The hour is "past four o'clock," and night is not far off. Bunter declares that he and Lord Peter are "near Fenchurch St. Paul," and as if summoned, "the sound of a church clock, muffled by the snow, came borne upon the wind; it chimed the first quarter." (NT, 10) The engine of execution, the bell tower, has spoken, though it is recognized only as a time piece by Lord Peter, whose response is entirely prophetic: "Thank God!" said Wimsey. "Where there is a church, there is civilization." (Ibid.) God is thus perceived to be active on the first page of the novel, and named in thanks for having placed a church so conveniently close to the accident scene on the second. Miss Sayers, like all proper mystery writers, has placed her clues in plain sight, or in this case, sound.

After a bitter walk of a mile and a half against the wind, the two men reach a signpost announcing "Fenchurch St. Paul," and as they turn toward the church, "they heard the clock again - nearer - chiming the third quarter." Throughout the first chapter, the twin themes of accident and bells are reiterated: "The gentlemen have had an accident with their car," (NT, 11) the village pubkeeper's wife tells "an elderly parson," who is, by coincidence, visiting in her parlour. This benign character invites Lord Peter and Bunter to spend the night at the vicarage, and, remarking "Bless my heart, there's five o'clock striking," (NT, 13) he ushers them into his car and drives them homeward. Wimsey exclaims, "Great Heavens! . . . 'is that your church?'" as "there loomed out of the whirling snow a grey, gigantic bulk," (Ibid.) and the major player in the story makes its first visual appearance.

Welcomed to tea and muffins, after still other references to accident, Lord Peter and his host begin a cheerful conversation. "Perhaps you do not mind the sound of bells?" the parson enquires, and immediately announces his plan, central to the plot, "to ring the New Year in" (NT, 17) with Fenchurch bells, a matter of nine hours and 15,840

Kent Treble Bob Majors. Lord Peter and Mr. Venables affably talk bells until interrupted by a knock. The Influenza - a name based upon the same concept of "influence" as that attributed to the stars and planets by astrology - has struck, and one of the ringers, Will Thoday, cannot attend. "An irreparable disaster," the rector says, using another astrological term; disaster means "ill-starred".

"Well," says Wimsey, not unexpectedly, perhaps, "I used at one time to pull quite a pretty rope." (NT, 20) And the matter is settled. "Nothing would please me more than to ring bells all day and all night." The relationship between coincidence, accident, and providence is openly expressed by the parson in response: "Positively, I cannot get over the amazing coincidence or your arrival. It shows the wonderful way in which Heaven provides even for our pleasures, if they be innocent." (NT, 21)

The practice for the ring is ready to begin; Miss Sayers emphasizes the ceremonial nature of the event. The ringers are arranged in a circle, and "in the centre, the Rector stood twittering like an amiable magician." (NT, 23) Each of the ringers, and each of the bells they are to ring, are introduced by name: there are no inanimate actors in this event. Warming to her campanological subject, the author calls change-ringing an "intricate ritual faultlessly performed," (NT, 26) as the ringers wield their handbells in preparation for the greater effort to follow.

The reader, perhaps, accepts all these passages as the necessary paraphernalia of local color: the frequent reiteration of "accident" as an excuse for the usual coincidence by which a detective happens to be present at the scene of a murder; the bell-ringing as a picturesque background to the proceedings. But such is not the case. Lord Peter has been brought by "Heaven," as the Rector plainly states, to participate in an execution, although all the participants are (as an executioner supposedly is), again in the parson's words, "innocent." These ritual preparations, this ritual activity, is to lead to the death of a villain, and it will be Lord Peter's Heaven-sent task to find out how and why the man has died.

Chapter One moves toward its conclusion with an emphasis upon the inherent goodness of the bells and their ringers who are to be the instruments of death. As the rehearsal ends, the man in "charge of the bells and ropes" (NT, 27) remarks that Lord Peter is not as tall as the man he is to replace, and his lordship retorts "In the words of the old bell-motto, I'd have it to the understood that though I'm little, yet I'm good." Good here is a pun upon good in the sense of skilled and good in the sense of innocent. The same double sense, used first of a bellringer

(Lord Peter), is immediately repeated in regard to the bells themselves: Mr. Venables escorts his guest to view the church and its bell-chamber with the remark, "To my mind, Lord Peter, the sight of a ring of good bells—" (NT, 28) when he is interrupted by his wife. But the word "good" has been applied to the human and brazen agents of the coming night's work: the divine intervene is therefore also, by implication, good.

In the bell-chamber Lord Peter is introduced to the bells by their sounds, as he raises his own – the second bell, Sabaoth, whose voice is rendered as "tan-tan", second to the highest. The purpose of the intended peel is to ring out the old year, and the book's title is explained by Hezekiah Lavender, "I rings the nine tailors. . . for the Old Year, see." (NT, 21) Nine tolls of a bell signify the death of a man, and it is the dying year who is mourned on New Year's Eve, even as the new year is welcomed. As this peel will in fact cause the death of a man, the title is doubly appropriate.

Peter and his escort the Rector are prevented, by a final coincidence, from actually examining the bells themselves. If they had mounted the tower to do so, they would have discovered the bound prisoner unknowingly awaiting his execution there. Mr. Godfrey who has declared he has brought all the necessary keys is suddenly discovered by the Rector to have departed with them, along with the other bell-ringers, and to signal this final intervention of Providence, "the clock in the tower chimed the three-quarters." (Ibid.) Even at this point the Rector makes a last attempt to call back Jack Godfrey – repeating his name several times – "But Jack, unaccountably deaf, was jingling the church keys in the porch, and the Rector, sighing a little accepted defeat." (NT, 32)

Unaccountably, indeed! But there is a long wait before Lord Peter (and the reader) learn how fateful, or rather, how providential, this unaccountable deafness is to be for the man who is bound above the bells. In the meantime the Rector begins to trot toward the rectory and supper, apologizing for losing count of the time, as Wimsey politely and with remarkable prescience replies, "Perhaps. . . the being continually in and about this church brings eternity too close." (Ibid.) Eternity thus poised as near as possible on the moment of transition from one year to the next and from this life to the other, the pregnant chapter ends.

This complex symbolic structure has not, of course, gone unnoticed. Geoffrey Lee finds that God is particularly "involved in the action" of *The Nine Tailors* in Parts I and IV. In part I, God brings Lord Peter "to Fenchurch St. Paul to execute vengeance upon the impenitent thief and double murderer," Deacon, and in Part IV God causes the flood which brings about the "redemptive death of Will Thoday," and shows Lord Peter "the solution to the mystery."² For Lee, the specific symbol of God's presence and direct activity in these two Parts is the tenor Bell, Tailor Paul, which "stand for God" and is pulled by Hezekiah Lavender.

The bells themselves are the cause of Deacon's death,

but they are operated by the bell-ringers, of whom Lord Peter is, providentially, one. Miss Sayers says that in *The Nine Tailors* "Peter himself remained. . . extraneous to the story and untouched by its spiritual conflicts."³ If this is true, it may be so because while Lord Peter is an instrument in the hands of God to execute justice, he is also "an eighteenth century Whig gentleman, born a little out of his time, and doubtful whether any claim to possess a soul is not a rather vulgar piece of presumption."⁴ Lionel Basney says that the mystery in *The Nine Tailors* is "virtually unguessable"⁵ because it is "committed by no one, or rather by several people, as innocently and indifferently as if it were a natural catastrophe." But for Basney, in contrast with Miss Sayers, "Wimsey is as much involved in the death as the other bell ringers," (Ibid.) and is thus "robbed involuntarily of his detective's distance and objectivity." Basney concurs with Lee that "there are definite similarities between the murder and the flood," (Ibid., 33) and concludes that "the bells' indifference to Wimsey's presence and suffering" as he climbs the tower during the flood and experiences first-hand their awful clamor, "clinches the ambiguity of Deacon's death at the same moment that it explains its mechanism." (Ibid., 34) Wimsey is thus "one of the murderers and, through their shared experience of the bell chamber, the murdered as well."

So far from being, as his own creator Miss Sayers would have it, "extraneous" and "untouched," Lord Peter bears in his own body the agony, brief enough not to be lethal, which in the nine long hours of Deacon's ordeal, have already killed their man. It seems to me that this scene, which sounds horribly real in the novel, whether or not a peel of bells could actually kill, is the central key to the greater mystery of God's innocence or guilt which haunts this novel from beginning to end, and causes it to provide the most profound *frisson* of any novel I have ever read.

Agatha Christie has defined the detective story as "the old Everyman morality tale, the hunting down of evil and the triumph of God."⁶ In this particular morality tale, the murder victim is himself a double murderer, and his death is a just reward for these crimes. As Basney puts it, "the bells are associated explicitly with moral retribution." (Basney, 27) It is, I think, Lord Peter's *innocence* that is indicated by his suffering in the presence of the bells:

He felt himself screaming, but could not hear his own cry. His ear-drums were cracking; his senses swan away. It was infinitely worse than any roar of heavy artillery. That had beaten and deafened, but this unendurable thrill clangour was a raving madness, an unadurable of devils. (NT, 344)

It is after this frightful revelation, signalled in part by a reference to Lord Peter's personal ordeal of shell-shock which has been resolved through his detective's vocation, that he is able to explain to the police who the murderers were: "Gauze, Sabaoth, John, Jericho, Jubilee, Dimity, Batty Thomas and Tailor Paul." (NT, 349)

The Superintendent is horrified as the revelation sinks in, and he calls upon precisely the names he should, beginning with the first of the quotation:

"My God!" said the Superintendent. "Why then, you were right, my lord, when you said that Rector, or you, or Hezekiah might have murdered him."

"I was right," said Wimsey. "We did." (NT, 350)

The Rector's comment upon the revelation is this: "Perhaps God speaks through those mouths of inarticulate metal, He is a righteous judge, strong and patient, and is provoked every day." (Ibid.)

If Lord Peter is innocent (as God is innocent) despite their direct role in causing the death, then why does Lord Peter suffer in the process of uncovering the mystery? Miss Sayers' admitted mentor, Charles Williams, has something to say about this. In his extremely significant essay, "The Cross," he explains that "popular doctrine in the Church has rather taken the view that we did not consciously choose. . . original sin, but. . . There remains for us the eternal dying that is its result."⁷ The God who made the world in this regrettable manner then proceeded to submit (as the incarnate deity, Jesus) to "the will which is He." That is, "He deigned to endure the justice he decreed." Lord Peter is not only the instrument of that justice, and the discoverer of the fact that justice has taken place, but also a victim, albeit not to the death, of that justice as well. He has thus been the chief actor, whether he admits to a soul or no, in what may be Miss Sayers' most profound morality play.

But when somebody kills anybody in a novel, it is always the creator who is the cause – the creator, that is, of the novel itself. *The Nine Tailors* can be read as a meditation not only upon divine justice and the mysterious operations of providence, but upon the creative process itself, a subject which Miss Sayers has addressed elsewhere. She said more than once that the only Christian work is good work well done, and she compared creative humankind with its creative Maker in the great speech with which she concluded her play, *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937):

**Praise Him that He hath made man
in His own image, a maker and
craftsman like Himself. . .⁸**

The same play begins with a line announcing the nature of the Creator: "Disposer supreme, and judge of the earth." (Plays, 103) This introductory speech includes the same image which concludes the action in *The Nine Tailors*, a massive flood, in a description of the power of God over clouds and winds, "They thunder, They lighten, the waters o'erflow." (Ibid.) These passages and indeed the whole theme of *The Zeal of Thy House* are related to Miss Sayers' profound theological study of human creativity as a model of the Trinity, *The Mind of the Maker*.

In that book she suggests, as she does in her essay "Gaudy Night," that the human creator, in her case, the novelist, finds, just as God does, that her creations, the characters in her novels, exhibit free will. (Sayers, 78-79) They develop, after her initial creative act in inventing them, into persons with an inner logic of their own. They cease to be puppets, so that if the author later wishes to

make use of them for some exigency of the plot, they cannot be so used without the result being not only forced but false. For this situation, too, the bell is a metaphor. It must ring true, and utter its own particular note (with all its complex inner structure of overtones and undertones) and no other.

The creator must work by means of the very rules she has created, and it is precisely by possession of free will that humankind can be said to have been created in the image of God. This mystery, for which the bells are a profound figure, is still more profoundly embodied in the human characters of *The Nine Tailors*. The life patterns of these people are intermixed not by mechanical means, or even by the actions of a divine bell-ringer, but through their own human actions and relationships as free persons, however inexorable or providential the context in which they sound their intricate sequences of notes. As the novelist, Miss Sayers has both signified and embodied the complexities of human experience in this novel. Her art can be judged by its ring of truth. ♣

Notes

- 1 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975 [1934]), p. 9. Hereafter NT.
- 2 Geoffrey Alan Lee, *Lord Peter Rings the Changes* (Hurstpierpoint, West Sussex: The Dorothy L. Sayers Historical and Literary Society, 1987), p. 14.
- 3 Dorothy L. Sayers, "Gaudy Night," *Titles to Fame*, Denys Kicham Roberts, editor (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1937), p. 77. Hereafter Sayers.
- 4 Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956 [1941]), p. 128.
- 5 Lionel Basney, "The Nine Tailors and the Complexity of Innocence," *As Her Whimsy Took Her*, Margaret P. Hannay, editor (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979), p. 24. Hereafter Basney.
- 6 Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (Canada: William Collins Sons and Co., Ltd., 1977), p. 452.)
- 7 Charles Williams, "The Cross," *The Image of the City*, Anne Ridler, editor (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 132.
- 8 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1959), p. 103. Hereafter Plays.



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