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The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women by Mo Moulton

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REVIEW ESSAY

THE MUTUAL ADMIRATION SOCIETY: HOW DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND HER OXFORD CIRCLE REMADE THE WORLD FOR WOMEN. Mo Moulton. New York: Basic Books, November 2019. ix + 372 pages. ISBN: 9781541644472 (hardcover); 9781541644465 (ebook). £22.48 RRP. \$30.00 USA.

When considering the life of author Dorothy L. Sayers, her readers and critics often define Sayers in terms of her written work, as detective novelist, short story writer, Christian apologist, translator, critic, essayist, poet, or playwright. Rarely is the *person* of Sayers considered, not in relation to her published writings, but as part of a larger movement, through her life experiences, affected by, and affecting, the lives of others in a web of linkages, or as a female of endeavor (Heilbrun 2) participating in a transitioning culture within the volatile timeframe of early to mid-twentieth century Britain.

Without exception, Sayers's biographers,¹ remaining true to biography protocol, place Sayers squarely in the center of the story, with others maneuvering around her only as they are acknowledged or evidenced to be relevant in her life. As a result, biographies of Sayers tend to shepherd the reader toward a singularly focused consideration of her, peppered with optional extras in the form of written detail: factual, creative, or whimsical.

Historian Mo Moulton, on the other hand, takes a unique perspective and a variant approach to the personal history of Dorothy L. Sayers. Moulton lifts Sayers out of the center of the story and moves her into a participant role within something greater than herself: a circle of women. However, they are not just a random circle of women, but a synchronistically gathered set of intellectually strong young Oxford students motivated by their idealistic determination to share an academic world which ostensibly welcomes them yet, pointedly, and due solely to their gender, denies their right to full membership in the university community.

Within this early twentieth-century Oxford University environment, comprising, equally, new opportunities and closed doors, in 1912 several Somerville College students formed a literary and socially nurturing

¹ Useful biographies include Kenney (1990), Coombes (1992), Reynolds (1993), and Percy (2010).

community within their college titled The Mutual Admiration Society.² The Society remained active not only through the Oxford life of its members but extended an influence throughout the professional and personal lives of several participants, Sayers among them.

Although the Mutual Admiration Society included six to twelve (or more) Somerville students at any one time during the course of its existence, Moulton has chosen to focus upon a subset of the society comprising those early participants who maintained an enduring relationship, moving in and out of each other's lives for decades. In effect, this is the intertwined story, almost a collective history, of four MAS women: Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Charis Ursula (Barnett) Frankenburg, Dorothea (Dorothy) Ellen Hanbury Rowe, and Dorothy Leigh Sayers, as they wove through one another's personal and professional lives within a web of long-term friendship begun through the MAS at the University of Oxford.

The overall structure of *The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women* is presented, in order, by a table of contents, a list of main characters and supporting cast, introduction by the author, a body proper of five parts totaling twenty chapters, and a conclusion, and is followed by the usual acknowledgments, notes, bibliography, and useful index.

The reader's attention is focused, initially, upon a list, in alphabetical order, of the four main characters of this story: Muriel St. Clare Byrne, later historian of the Tudor Era and co-playwright with Dorothy L. Sayers; Charis Barnett Frankenburg, later magistrate and noted expert on parenting;³ Dorothea Ellen Hanbury Rowe, later English teacher and founder of an amateur theatre company; and Dorothy L. Sayers, later novelist, advertising copywriter,⁴ playwright, essayist, and Christian apologist (*The Mutual Admiration Society*

² Henceforth abbreviated MAS. Sayers gave the circle its name in October 1912. The first meeting was held on Wednesday, November 7, 1912 at 7 p.m. in the Somerville rooms of Amphilis Middlemore. Sayers read a lengthy poem, "Earl Ulfric," composed several years earlier. Sayers's participation in the MAS lasted from November 1912 through June 1915 when she went down from Oxford, but Sayers established contact with later, as well as with remaining, members of the writing circle when she returned to the city of Oxford in May 1917 as a publishing intern for Basil Blackwell.

³ See Frankenburg's autobiography, *Not Old, Madam, Vintage* (1975). She also authored two introductory Latin grammars for young students, *Latin with Laughter* (1934) and *More Latin with Laughter* (1937), both illustrated by Dorothy H. Rowe.

⁴ Sayers designed several successful advertising campaigns for Colman's Mustard Co. and Guinness Ale while working as a copywriter for S.H. Benson advertising agency in London from May 1922 to December 1929.

[T.M.A.S.] xi).⁵ Following is a second list of supporting cast, including several MAS co-members and the life partners of three main characters. It presents a succinct and clearly delineated, if somewhat narrow, introduction to participants in the coming story.

A surprising discovery was to find author Muriel Jaeger relegated to a role within the supporting cast. Notwithstanding, Jaeger is, at times, an influential character in the story, and deservedly so. Sayers's and Jaeger's friendship began and remained strong through most years. DLS even dedicated a poem "To M.J." in her first book of poetry, *OP. I.*, and, further, dedicated her first novel, *Whose Body?*, to her close friend and confidante. Muriel (Jim) certainly had strong effect upon the personal and professional lives of Sayers during their Oxford days and through the 1920's, as both were experimenting with careers in writing fiction: Sayers with detection and Jaeger with science fiction.⁶ As an intriguing counterpoint to Sayers's early writing career experiences, Jaeger's history as fiction author might have been more thoroughly explored with respect to the mutual influences in their early published novels. However, Jaeger is referenced often, through numerous chapters in the book, and with careful consideration of her writings and relationship with Sayers.⁷

In the introduction to *The Mutual Admiration Society*, Moulton immediately anchors readers to the story by placing us in the scenario of the first MAS meeting, held on November 7th in the Somerville rooms of Amphy Middlemore. It is an effective and charming way to begin the story, allowing the reader a comfortable sense of belonging to the group from its inception. We become involved in the story by virtue of witnessing the creation of the MAS circle. The reader becomes a participant observer. Our attention is sympathetically drawn into the experience of discovered mutual regard and shared adventure. We are given gentle access to an early episode in the Oxford life of Dorothy L. Sayers which had profound effect upon her future.

Although other student writers, such as long-term MAS members Amphilis Middlemore and Muriel Jaeger, were present at the initial meeting of six students,⁸ Moulton has chosen to focus our attention upon a four member

⁵ Various literary historians consider Sayers an apologist based upon her theological essays, plays, and radio broadcast, later published by Gollancz as *The Man Born to be King* (1943). Sayers herself never claimed nor acknowledged the title of Christian apologist.

⁶ See *The Question Mark* (1926) and *The Man with Six Senses* (1927), published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth Press. American edition of *The Question Mark* by Macmillan & Co., 1926.

⁷ Chapters 1-4, 5-8, 9, 12.

⁸ The six members at the first meeting of the MAS were probably DLS, Charis Barnett, Muriel Jaeger, Dorothy Rowe, Amphilis Middlemore and Margaret Amy Chubb (or Catherine Godfrey). Muriel St. Clare Byrne arrived in 1913 to join the MAS one year later.

subset of the MAS. The author notes that these four women “created a space in which they could grow beyond the limitations of Edwardian girlhood and become complex, creative adults with a radically capacious notion of what it might mean to be both human and female” (*TMAS* 1). Although this tightly focused approach may not give a comprehensive picture of the membership within the MAS, it does serve to provide a clear center of interest. We can understand these four women. We are drawn to them by their optimism, insecurities, determination, needs, and of their links to one another forged and broken through decades. These women, despite the odds, were survivors, each shaping her own way. We like their individual stories, and we wish to know more about them and about the ties that Sayers had to each of these women. The unfolding of relationships though time brings a dimension to Sayers’s life not often found elsewhere.

The author opens to the reader, additionally, a wider societal context in the introduction by providing an historical backdrop to the MAS story,⁹ noting the slow revolution in gender relations that had been started by previous generations of Oxford feminist activists.¹⁰ The women of the 1912 entering class of Somerville College enjoyed all the rights gained by their predecessors, other than, of course, the final right of full matriculation into the Oxford academic community. That privilege would be granted after the first World War, an academic promotion for women students relentlessly advocated by strong women leaders such as Emily Penrose,¹¹ Principal of Somerville College, who insisted that her students take the full degree course and accompanying preliminary exams, even if the degree itself was denied them. Miss (later Dame) Penrose’s firm standards for Somerville students paved the way for their right to a formal university degree, later granted in 1920. Dorothy L. Sayers, Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Charis Barnett, Muriel Jaeger, Marjorie Barber, Dorothy Rowe, Winifred Holtby, and Vera Brittain were among those who participated in the landmark graduation ceremony of October 1920.¹²

Additionally, Moulton tackles the rarely discussed wall of gender discrimination in the postwar burgeoning professional careers of these four Oxford educated women. The gender revolution had begun, and according to

Dorothy Rowe called her “a sweet child who writes quite good stuff” (Frankenburg, *Not Old, Madam*, *Vintage* 63).

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of Somerville’s history, see Adams, *Somerville for Women*.

¹⁰ See also Leonard, Adams.

¹¹ Emily Penrose was Principal of Somerville College from 1907 to 1926. She was instrumental in the fight for women’s right to an Oxford university degree, which was finally achieved in 1920.

¹² In addition to undergraduate degrees, several MAS women also received an advanced M.A. degree. Those included Sayers, Barber, Jaeger, Barnett, and Byrne.

the author, "The members of the MAS made the most of the small but significant opening afforded to them, while continuing to face unequal opportunities, double legal standards, and systematic discrimination" (*TMAS* 3), in both job seeking and housing availability. Thus, Moulton prepares readers to expect a story of opposites, of entitlement juxtaposed with discrimination, of achieved success countered by severe disappointment, of life as the proverbial box of mixed chocolates. It all starts at Somerville College, Oxford, in the autumn of 1912.

Thus comfortably setting the stage and inviting the reader to experience, through an interactive reading process, the world of the Oxford woman student in the early twentieth century, the author segues directly into the story of the MAS sisterhood in "Part I, Oxford, 1912–1918." This section is further divided into four chapters: "Arriving at Oxford," "Mutual Admiration Society on Stage and Page," "University Passions," and "Battlefronts."

It is a refreshing surprise to find the story commencing with the arrival of Charis Barnett to Somerville College at the beginning of Michaelmas Term. The author's choice to highlight the initial Oxford experience of Charis, an MAS member with whom Sayers enthusiasts are not often familiar, is a thoughtful and rather elegant touch. The unexpected choice invites the reader to invest easily in young Charis's positive response to Oxford. We become intrigued and eager to learn what happens next. Furthermore, in the context of chapter one, the reader is introduced to Somerville College, and to the anticipation of possibilities that was clearly felt by the young women of the incoming class of 1912.¹³

In chapters two and three, the author plants us firmly within the student culture of Somerville as members of the newly formed MAS participate in literary meetings, classes, plays, and practical jokes such as nightly ghost parties orchestrated by Jim Jaeger, Amphy Middlemore, and Dorothy Rowe. Yet, "Amid the pranks and jokes, the MAS continued its work in earnest" (*TMAS* 27). DLS continues her quest to become a serious poet, Dorothy Rowe hones her literary and editorial skills, Jim Jaeger reads excerpts from a developing novel,¹⁴ and Amphy has the honor to be the first member of the MAS to have a poem published in *The Fritillary*.¹⁵ In "University Passions," DLS's infatuation with Bach Choir conductor Hugh Percy Allen is recounted with mention made of the poetry DLS wrote to Allen, as well as DLS's dedicated participation in the Bach

¹³ See also Vera Brittain's *Chronicle of Youth* and *Testament of Youth*.

¹⁴ Conceivably reading her beginning efforts toward *Question Mark* (1926), Jaeger's first science fiction novel.

¹⁵ *The Fritillary*, March 1913: 71-72. For a discussion of Middlemore's literary interests, achievements, and contributions to the writing circle while at Somerville, see Prescott, "Women of the MAS."

Choir, both fueled by a student crush focused on Allen,¹⁶ one which appears to have ended on a high note of humor as Dorothy, with theatric flair, impersonated his mannerisms in the *Going Down Play* of 1915. The second year at Somerville saw the beginning of changes. Read particularly Moulton's account (*TMAS* 44-50) of the various emotional dance moves among the four women as they formed tenuous, then stronger, links to one another, next breaking those and weaving others with the alacrity that comes only with the carelessness of youth. As Somerville students, they were entirely concerned with the present.¹⁷

By chapter four, however, the scene shifts dramatically, suddenly, and with irreversible finality. World War I has been declared. Somerville is commandeered as a military hospital and the students as well as faculty moved to rooms at Oriel College¹⁸ or off campus to the city of Oxford. The campus is depleted of its male population through the course of the war, 1914-1919, and women take over the administration as well as the studentship of Oxford. The Somerville women's academic community learns to adjust, with grace, to severe change. The war itself seems not to have overly affected DLS while in process; the aftershock, however, lasted well into the 1920's for her as well as for the other three MAS members. Their lives "would always be, as Charis admitted, informed by the cataclysmic conflict of World War I. But they were also shaped by the ongoing limitations on women's public work and independent lives, and by the communities [...] that sought to transcend those limitations" (*TMAS* 65).

Through the foundations of Part I, the reader receives a sense of belonging, of learning, of growing, within the environment of pre-war Oxford, and later with the onset of war. Furthermore, the chapters reflect an understanding, an overall sense, of women's culture in this rarified yet adventurous and determinedly positive community, and are worth reading carefully to inhale the optimism of these young women as they embark on the adventure of entering, supporting, and participating in, a wider academic community of women. It was a learning process honed by Somerville structure and led by visionaries such as Emily Penrose and Mildred Pope.¹⁹ The lessons learned at Somerville stayed with each of the MAS women and often shaped

¹⁶ DLS rejoined the Bach Choir when she returned to the city of Oxford in May 1917.

¹⁷ See also Sayers's *Letters* 1.65-118 for her letters home during this time, and Frankenburg, *Vintage* 57-71 for Charis's personal account of the years 1912-14.

¹⁸ For a first-hand account of the WWI military displacement effect on Somerville College, see Byrne & Mansfield, *Somerville College*, 1922. See also Vera Farnell, *A Somervillian Looks Back*, 1948.

¹⁹ Mildred Pope was Sayers's tutor (advisor) at Somerville and supervised her senior thesis on a translation of the Tristan legend. Pope also edited Sayers's published version, *Tristan in Brittany* (1929).

their response to crises later in life as they each learned to develop grace under pressure, taught by the war years at Somerville and beyond.

The memory and usefulness of Somerville lessons become poignant in later chapters. Moulton carefully shapes the scenes of their Oxford years as a scaffolding which holds and even determines, to a good extent, the course through life each of the four women sets for herself. The glue which holds them together is the bond formed through the MAS.

It is useful to read, along with the narrative, the original writings, while at Somerville, of Sayers, Barnett, Rowe, and Byrne.²⁰ Their published works during this period were primarily in the form of poetry, short stories, and reviews published in *The Fritillary* magazine and in *Oxford Poetry*.²¹ The combined experience of reading a story narrative along with the original writings of all four students brings with it a depth of understanding that will enhance the reader's appreciation of the unique literary journeys taken by these MAS women. As emergent Somerville scholars, authors, and teachers, some, such as Charis Barnett, Dorothy Rowe, and Margaret Amy Chubb,²² also volunteered during the war as nurses and later became social activists in the medical field.

The author neatly closes the circle of Part I with the continuing experiences of Charis Barnett, no longer a studious undergraduate, but now, in 1916, a war volunteer, a certified midwife sent to the hospital at Châlons-sur-Marne, France. Her maturing character was being forged by the experience of dealing with birth in the midst of casualty, conflict, and social injustice. A poignant memory is described by the author: "Charis, for her part, would always remember the bitterly cold Christmas she spent there, singing carols over the noise of fussy babies" (*TMAS* 64). Her life would reflect her resolve to validate the lives of those who had died in the war. "The loss didn't overshadow her, she said, but it was always present" (65).

In Part 2, "The Slough of Despond, 1918–1929," comprising four chapters, "Teach or Marry?," "Detection and Despair," "Professional Motherhood," and "Sleepless Nights," Moulton moves our attention to the practical decisions each woman must make with regard to her personal life, scholarly life, or professional life, pinpointing, with the insight that comes only from personal understanding, the sometimes severe postwar experiences of the circle. "At Somerville, the members of the MAS had rooms of their own. [...] In

²⁰ See *DLS: American Journal of Sayers Studies*, Volume II, 2019, for a representative sample of Oxford MAS writings. <https://americanjournalofsayersstudies.wordpress.com/>

²¹ *Oxford Poetry*, 1914–1919, includes a number of poems and translations published by MAS members.

²² Margaret Amy Chubb Pyke later became Chairman of the UK Family Planning Association.

the decade after their graduation, they were, by contrast, on the front lines of the struggle for independence. No one would give them a room of their own" (TMAS 69). With strict attention to detail regarding the harsh reality of their post-Oxford experiences, along with some surprising revelations in the unfolding story, the author gives us perhaps the most intriguing, well-researched, and thoughtful chapters of the book. As with the male students of Oxford who enlisted in the war, finding themselves evicted from an entitled lifestyle and thrust into the *Inferno*, female post-Oxford students found themselves, after the war, similarly dropped into what might be described as an economically trying *Purgatorio*.

The term "Slough of Despond," signifying that "which lies just inside the gateway of every path to the literary life," comes courtesy of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), later quoted by Vera Brittain (*Testament of Youth* 545), a contemporary Somervillian who was famously not a member of the MAS, although her close friend Winifred Holtby did join the MAS during a portion of her own Somerville years.

Young Sayers, now in her mid-twenties, Barnett, Rowe, and Byrne were looking outwardly at this point toward a society which was rapidly changing. Even the world of Oxford was never again to enjoy pre-war innocence and complaisance. Rather than the humorously confident, somewhat impudent, entitled and inwardly focused perspective of the pre-war Somerville student, we begin to see emerging a new woman, one who is at a crossroads, dealing with relative poverty, and a more serious approach to economic survival with uncertain future prospects.²³ Each of the four students is growing into variations of that woman who must cope with the war-traumatized culture of Britain in tandem with severe economic repercussions of the cataclysm. Postwar social norms continue to reflect bias against single women in acquisition of housing and job seeking. Perhaps worse, their lives are continually subject to social scrutiny. "DLS found that a single woman who was neither a student nor an academic had no obvious place in Oxford society. Her landladies were dubious about her. [One] grumbled over DLS's social habits [...]. Single women were poorer, too" (TMAS 79).

Moving through the individual chapters, the reader learns in "Teach or Marry?" and "Professional Motherhood" who among the four decided to fly solo, who chose to marry, and who decided to partner with whom at which time and for what reason. We are introduced at various points, not necessarily in linear time progression, to the chosen partners of each woman, from Eric Whelpton, John Courson, and Atherton (Mac) Fleming for Dorothy—quite a

²³ See Brittain's *Chronicle* and *Testament of Youth*; Reynolds 63-96; Sayers's *Letters* I.119-166; Coombs 61-75.

dashing name, no doubt adding to his appeal—to prominent Sydney Frankenburg for Charis. We learn about the complications of Byrne and Barber's private life when a woman named Susan enters, producing a domestic situation reminiscent of the game 'musical chairs.' The various familial partnerships, matrimonial, maternal, or monocratic, of these women, have certain future repercussions upon their ongoing support of, and communication with, one another.

In "Detection and Despair," a particularly satisfying episode occurs as Moulton recounts the first Oxford graduation ceremony for women on October 14, 1920 (85-86). More significantly, in this chapter the reader is firmly grounded in the beginning stages of DLS's detection writing career as she grapples with an emotionally devastating and physically complicated relationship with author John Cournos, whose novel, *The Devil is an English Gentleman* (1932), is loosely based upon his affair with Sayers. A reading of Cournos's novel may provide the reader some insight into his perspective on the relationship. As Sayers is struggling through the Cournos affair and her subsequent pregnancy, she is also attempting to juggle her advertising career with detection writing. At the same time, but under very different circumstances, Charis Barnett Frankenburg is forging ahead with marriage and the science of motherhood. It is recommended to read "Professional Motherhood" in tandem with *Not Old, Madam, Vintage* (1975), the autobiography of Charis Frankenburg, for the pleasure of reading a firsthand memoir along with the narrative. Furthermore, in Sayers's later novel *Strong Poison* (September 1930), we are introduced to Harriet Vane, Sayers's uneasy doppelganger, who is accused of murdering a distastefully cruel lover, bringing into the plot a variation of Sayers's own troubling emotional relationship with Cournos. As with other parallel readings, *Strong Poison* is a recommended eye-opener into Sayers's cathartic emotional purging of the Cournos episode. Although we cannot, and certainly should not, equate the character of Harriet Vane with that of Sayers, Vane certainly provides a reflection through a glass darkly.²⁴

Elsewhere, Muriel St. Clare Byrne is experiencing a period of "Sleepless Nights" and the angst associated with an unfulfilled destiny. This is a difficult chapter, but provides a telling juxtaposition of perspective between that of Charis and Muriel. Moulton deals, as well, with the issue of sexual

²⁴ There is an amount of tension in *Strong Poison* as well as in *Gaudy Night* that skirts the genre of gothic horror. Sayers was fascinated by the novels of Wilkie Collins and his "power to create a spacious world populated with interesting and entertaining people" (*The Moonstone* xi), even attempting a biography of Collins which remained unfinished. It is possible that she was experimenting with elements of the genre represented by writers such as Collins and Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu as she puzzled out the plot of *Strong Poison* and later of *Gaudy Night*.

identity among the MAS women: heterosexual, lesbian, or ostensibly unconcerned. It is a subject not clearly referenced in the literature regarding Sayers or other members of the MAS, and it is time this white elephant in the room were tackled directly but with insight of understanding. "Their lives, however, tell eloquent stories about the diversity of the choices they made" (135). These chapters provide a fascinating reading experience, divulging little-known information and intriguing theories about the personal realities faced by these four women as well as the subsequent effect upon their careers as authors, teachers, activists, and scholars.

Part 3, "Head and Heart, 1929–1939," takes us through the years of "Departures and Reunions," "Subversive Spinster," "The Problem of Marriage," "Does It Please You?," and "What the Busman Wrought." During this second post-World War I decade, the focus falls back on the MAS circle, drawing together again the women who had gone their separate ways in previous years. The author makes a case that Muriel Jaeger, after an earlier rift with DLS, separated from the core group, with little future involvement. This appears to be more the author's opinion than a reflection of actual occurrence. Jaeger worked with Rowe in the 1930's and dedicated her 1956 book to an MAS member, Margaret Amy Chubb Pyke, acknowledging Pyke as a "first reader and friendly critic" (Jaeger, *Before Victoria*), so there is good evidence that Jaeger remained a communicating and working link to the others through the 1950's. Further analysis of remaining letters between Sayers and Jaeger may be in order to clarify their ongoing relationship, or lack thereof, during the decade 1929-39.

We do know that Dorothy broke off relations with another later MAS member, Doreen Wallace,²⁵ over that which was probably a misunderstanding of reference by Sayers. Wallace took offense over a comment in chapter 2 of *Gaudy Night* that she supposed was aimed at herself, yet, in actuality, Sayers was probably referencing her own cousin, Margaret Leigh,²⁶ in the dismissive comment, or possibly referencing both women. Sayers did not explain nor apologize, so the rift remained final between Wallace and DLS.

One question the reader may ponder when considering the relationships, from 1929 through 1939, among the four MAS women highlighted in the book, is, "What evidence supports the thesis that these four women remained a continuing close circle of influence during the decade 1929-39?" The

²⁵ See Shepherd.

²⁶ Margaret Leigh was first cousin to Dorothy L. Sayers and arrived at Somerville College in 1913. She and Dorothy did not interact often at Somerville, nor did Margaret become a member of the MAS. She did, however, become a fiction author of some repute later while living in Scotland. See Leigh's fiction works in the bibliography. Margaret does indirectly reference Sayers in her autobiography, *The Fruit in the Seed*, with several acerbic comments, pointing to a certain rivalry between the two Leighs.

evidence is a bit confusing. The author remarks that “members of the MAS began spending more time together” (152) during this period. But it appears that only three of the original four (minus Charis) vacationed and traveled together. Furthermore, Marjorie Barber was fully integrated into this vacationing group, as was D. Rowe’s sister, Bena. Membership in the close circle appears to have shifted with time by the forging of new links and availability of attendance. Muriel St. Clare Byrne and D. Rowe developed a close working and holiday camaraderie, as did DLS, Muriel, and Barber. DLS would join summer gatherings of D. Rowe and Bena, her sister, along with Muriel and Marjorie Barber in the late 1930’s, but Charis Frankenburg appeared not to be a viable part of the group at this time. DLS cultivated a friendship with Helen Simpson²⁷ and wrote often to Ivy Shrimpton regarding John Anthony, Sayers’s son,²⁸ as well as to Muriel.²⁹ Jaeger and Rowe worked together on amateur theatre projects, but Sayers and Jaeger had cooled their friendship, possibly because of DLS’s marriage to Fleming, of which Jaeger may not have approved (148-149).

However, all of this indicates that the four women of the MAS composed a fluid and often tenuous web, members moving in and out, circling around one another at close proximity or at ever widening distances, taking in new members while losing contact with others. Friendships and working partnerships appeared to shift and reform among the different women through time. In the revelatory chapter, “Subversive Spinster,” attention falls upon D. Rowe, a “classic spinster aunt [...] serving as a caretaker for family and close friends” (159). This chapter provides new and welcome information about Dorothy H. Rowe, particularly of her life during the decade 1929-1929, which is rarely explored in previous biographical accounts, if at all. Moulton makes the observation that DLS was rather horrified by spinsterhood and its resultant dreariness of dependence upon others (159-160), yet Dorothy Rowe, once the most animated, promising, and daring of the MAS circle, found herself, not unhappily, in this role. With characteristic verve, Rowe enthusiastically created, acted in, and mentored, with friend George Stone, the Bournemouth Little Theatre Club, producing, for decades, innovative community plays. Her productions were noted for moving traditional plots into the modern world, using current-day props and dress, thus providing the modern audience with comfortable keys for interpretation. The theatre became quite profitable in time and produced Muriel Jaeger’s play *The Sanderson Syndicate* in the mid-30’s, thereby connecting again Rowe’s and Jaeger’s working and personal friendship. Moulton ends this chapter of Dorothy Rowe’s influence upon modern amateur

²⁷ Sayers, *Letters* I.350-51.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, I. 306-359.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I. 343-355.

theatre by noting that Rowe “used the theatre to reinterpret traditional culture for a truly modern audience,” and by so doing, “she changed what amateur theatre could mean” (168), her courage being noticed even by St. John Ervine, drama critic of the London *Observer* (163).

In two chapters, “The Problem of Marriage” and “Does it Please You?“, we get a sense of how intricately the web is woven through the varied personal partnership experiences of these four, now firmly mature, women. Dorothy is having doubts about continuing her marriage to Mac Fleming, while Charis and Sydney are humming along together companionably, both involved in humanitarian projects while raising a large family. The two pictures produce, again, a study in opposites, of juxtaposed, somewhat ironic, possibilities within partnership. Both DLS and Charis have chosen traditional gender roles in the coupling of marriage, yet with distinctly differing results. Muriel St. Clare Byrne and Marjorie Barber are now fully absorbed in their own lesbian marital relationship, apparently fraught with arguments and drama, yet situated in the glittering world of London theatre and buffered by an “extended network of friends and professional acquaintances” (177). In 1935, this web of partnerships and adult drama would push the collaboration of DLS, Byrne, and Marjorie Barber to a new theatrical project.

The creation of the play *Busman’s Honeymoon*³⁰ was acknowledged by Muriel to be a true collaboration among the three writers (190). As such, Moulton brings to our attention the point that such joint creation also sheds new light on both books, *Gaudy Night* and *Busman’s Honeymoon*. This collaboration, Moulton notes, changes the texts (190). This is a fascinating point. Moulton’s insight into the possible backstory to both books may lead to new and further interpretations of the symbolism attached to each plot and may partly elucidate the complicated relationship between Wimsey and Harriet Vane. If it is true, Moulton argues, that Muriel and Bar were actively involved in editing and creating ideas for the play which incorporated, by necessity, the extended story, then “in a sense Muriel and Bar become alternate models for Harriet and Peter” (190). This observation, in itself, gives Sayers researchers food for thought. The story of Wimsey and Vane then takes on hitherto unexplored dimensions that transcend the mundane plot of pursuing male and reluctant female, culminating in the proverbial happy ending. Indeed, *Gaudy Night* is less a romantic novel than one which scrutinizes the sheltered and sometimes anachronistic world of the female Oxfordian academic, a world to which Muriel aspired, but Sayers did not. However, DLS does present an atmosphere of support for Harriet, possibly in memory of the support she herself received while at Oxford from her tutor,

³⁰ See Dorothy L. Sayers and Muriel St. Clare Byrne’s *Busman’s Honeymoon: A Detective Comedy in Three Acts* and Sayers’s *Love All and Busman’s Honeymoon*.

instructors, and MAS friends. It will be interesting to see where this analysis is taken by future literary critics as Sayers's novels continue to be deconstructed in light of new information and theories.

In "What the Busman Wrought," Moulton explores the experiences of DLS, Muriel, and Bar in shaping, together, a London play. Their primary problem in presenting Peter and Harriet's story on stage was to "present a mystery plot onstage in a way that both fulfilled the genre's rules and made for good drama" (191). Since detection and drama are tightly linked, often by cause and effect, the problem had more to do with the details of fair play than with the overarching structure and mood of the production.³¹ All three, as writers and editors, took this responsibility most seriously and wrestled with the particulars by letter and in person. By most accounts, they were successful in the balancing of drama and detection principles. The play received mixed reviews, but the audiences liked it (199), as they had taken previously to the character of Lord Peter Wimsey.

The commercial success of the play gave DLS and Muriel opportunity to pursue those interests which had taken second place to economic necessity. For Muriel and Bar, it allowed more time for historical research while securing their daily needs. For DLS, a resurrection of her interest in moral questions and religious drama now shaped her writings, leading her to write the first of her sacred plays, *The Zeal of Thy House*,³² for Canterbury Cathedral. Here, the reader reaches a turning point in the MAS story, an increase in momentum, as Charis comes back into the picture by socializing with Muriel and DLS. Muriel returns happily to Tudor research, and DLS uses the *Busman's* experience to experiment with religiously themed playwriting. Yet, in the distance, there is the ominous rumbling of another cataclysm as World War II takes shape and disrupts, more severely than did the first world war, the life of each woman.

Part 4 of the continuing MAS saga, "Visions of a New World, 1929—1945," comprises five chapters, "War Breaks Out," "Service and Identity," "The Greengate Hospital," "Running to Stand Still," and "Bridgeheads to the Future." Moulton shifts our perspective, as the author has done several times previously, to focus not entirely on Sayers but on the effect of war upon the Frankenburgs, Muriel and Bar's home life, and upon D. Rowe's theatre. Furthermore, we are given the overall context of the political situation facing Britain as war is

³¹ See Dale (Introduction to Sayers's *Love All*; "Wimsey Lost and Found") and Coombs (esp. 119) for a discussion of *Busman's Honeymoon* in relation to the unfinished manuscript of *Thrones, Dominations*. See also Downing.

³² *The Zeal of Thy House* was commissioned by Canterbury Cathedral as the play for their 1937 Festival and was performed on June 7, 1937 within the dome of the cathedral. Attending were Helen Simpson, Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Marjorie Barber, and Dorothy's Aunt Maud, Mrs. H.D. Leigh.

declared. This is, as expected, another difficult set of chapters, as the women are flung into the implacable trauma of a second world war, this one worse than the last. There is stress upon stress as each of the four women attempts to achieve normalcy in an intolerably abnormal upheaval of life.

“War Breaks Out” deals with the initial effects upon Charis and family, D. Rowe, DLS, Bar, and Muriel. Called, initially, the “Phony War” from September 1939 to May 1940, since “not much seemed to happen” (219), events clearly escalated through time for the women and their affected families during the episodes of the Blitzkrieg. Charis becomes involved with the progressive Greengate Hospital and Open-Air School, Bar repeatedly moves her students to safety, and Muriel’s household becomes increasingly mobile and chaotic when she is forced to change residences, as “all around them, the Blitz raged” (223). Moulton ends the chapter with a realization by each of the four friends that the new world which was emerging would “push them to ask with a fresh urgency what was required of them as citizens in a new global crisis” (223). Clearly, the inquiry may be seen to be remarkably relevant, as well, to our current world crises of 2020.

In “Service and Identity” and “The Greengate Hospital,” the author deals, at length, with Charis Barnett Frankenburg’s experiences, losses, and victories as a woman belonging to a Jewish family. Charis is now a single parent with the angst of seeing her sons leave to fight. She is also dealing with the reality of anti-Semitism in her own country. Most British, the author notes, consider the war a fight against Nazism, but not one in defense of European Jews. However, Charis’s sons identify increasingly with their Jewish heritage. Charis is afraid to place her daughter in a school situation that would be uncomfortable for the child with regard to her Jewish identity and eventually enrolls her at Malvern College where, Charis states, “I don’t think there will be any racial trouble” (229). She and her children are often confronted with demeaning remarks and ethnic jokes regarding their Jewish heritage, but Charis speaks out publicly against the anti-Semitism to which British Jews are submitted. Even DLS and Bar display somewhat insensitive opinions towards Jewish ethnicity. It would not be unrealistic to suppose that Charis felt increasingly isolated from the group at this point. Possibly, as a result, Charis becomes more involved with her Jewish community, and, to a greater degree throughout the war, with the Greengate Hospital. As she is walking this difficult path, Charis develops a political stance that will not tolerate exclusion based on race or religion, and she becomes a Salford magistrate in 1938. Throughout the war, Charis continues to protect the Greengate Hospital and Open-Air School by housing them in her private home.

Another project which Charis develops at Greengate becomes, later, a model of early childhood education. She champions a prevention-first approach to early behavior problems; corporal punishment is forbidden at the school, and teachers are trained with skills of behavioral control. Charis publicizes her education model in several books.³³ Her philosophy and teaching principles emphasize attachment and security, with the result that Greengate becomes a social experiment which helps to usher in, by practical application of common sense techniques and child-centered educational principles, the new science of child psychology (246).

In "Running to Stand Still," Moulton changes the scene and sends us to visit Muriel, Bar, and the shadowy figure of Susan during the war as they are each straining to maintain an even keel in personal relationships and with one another. Bar is writing for women's magazines, disguising her lesbian relationship by using conventional and traditional terms in her articles (247), and by applying DLS's marital situation as a model for communication about the straight lifestyle. By 1941, Bar is writing short stories published under the name Anne Elliott, ostensibly in tribute to Jane Austen's character (251). Muriel and the somewhat enigmatic figure of Susan are reunited, although not to the extent that Susan supplants Bar in Muriel's life. Yet the three somehow manage to construct a life together. How complicated. By 1942, Muriel is tired of living with Susan and DLS is applied to for a respite (253). Little wonder that DLS kept somewhat of a distance from the travails of Muriel & Co. at this point, seeking, herself, a rest from the daily annoyances of married life during the war and seeking, as well, a new direction in which to apply her innate skills and talents of translation to medieval poetry. She would find an answer, eventually, in efforts toward a modern English translation of Dante's *La Divina Commedia*.³⁴

"Bridgeheads to the Future" is an exercise in exploring the thought processes of DLS during this period of her life. Moulton makes the point that DLS was becoming increasingly concerned with three related issues: the importance of work to leading an ethical, spiritually satisfying, life; the right of women as humans to that work; and the problem of communicating the true excitement of Christianity rather than to descend into a mild, boring, version of the faith (255). DLS had always been concerned with the first two issues, certainly the second which formed the framework of her advertising and writing

³³ See Charis Frankenburg, 1934, 1960, 1970 for an in-depth look at her approach to early child education, adolescent behavior issues, and innovative, positive, child-centered educational techniques.

³⁴ Sayers successfully translated the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* as *Hell* (1949) and *Purgatory* (1955), respectively, keeping the original couplet rhymes of Dante, but using language that was focused toward the modern reader and speaker, as she had earlier used in *The Man Born to Be King* (1943).

careers. The third issue had been tackled early in Sayers's adult writing life as the main theme of *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (1918),³⁵ a provocative book of religiously flavored poems which was neither understood nor appreciated by the majority Christian reading public. To DLS, the solution to all three lay in the use of language. Formal, anachronistic, and difficult language alienated the populace. It had no relevance to daily communication, existence, or faith. The key was in the use of vernacular language that was easily understood and provided links to normative daily life. This solution DLS understood all too well from her advertising years at Benson's. Language that could pack a punch was remembered and repeated. It was an instrument of power (255).³⁶

Sayers began to use the problems of war to rethink the future. To that end, she, Muriel, and a mutual friend, Helen Simpson, decided in 1939 to launch a series of books written by leading thinkers of the day which could be used by the public as reflective reading about universal social phenomena (259). The books were to serve as an attention antidote to the bombing, providing useful distraction and entertainment when people were forced into air raid shelters during the Blitz.

Sayers became the editor of this series, titled "Bridgeheads," and the first book in the series was *The Mind of the Maker*.³⁷ The project eventually fizzled, but was an example of her intellectual ambition (261), even, or particularly during, the harrowing experience of war. Her next project was the controversial, and eventually celebrated, *Life of Christ* (later *The Man Born to Be King*), broadcasts on BBC. When advertised, and before broadcasts aired, they were roundly condemned by a vocal population whose protestations assured the broadcast's success. Everyone wanted to hear what the fuss was about. It centered around Sayers's use of modern English (and some American slang) spoken by Christ and the apostles.³⁸ After the initial outrage, which drew

³⁵ Published while working for Basil Blackwell in 1918 as Sayers attempted to infuse Christian poetry with an alternate, somewhat daring, perspective, *Catholic Tales* was not well received, circulating in only 1,000 copies.

³⁶ Sayers learned the language of advertising through her successful Colman's Mustard campaign, "Have you heard of the Mustard Club?" and her Toucan-themed Guinness Ale campaign while working at S.H. Benson advertising agency. Both campaigns were immensely popular, producing large profits for each sponsor. Sayers earned a sparing wage for her work and did not share in those profits, even though in later years she was qualified to do so. In her own words, she was glad to have the job until royalties from her novels allowed her to leave Benson's at the end of 1929.

³⁷ Later published by HarperCollins in 1941.

³⁸ Headlines in the *Daily Mail* announced: B.B.C. "LIFE OF CHRIST" PLAY IN U.S. SLANG.

hundreds to the weekly broadcasts, the series was deemed a success and was followed by a book version which remains in print to this day.³⁹

Sayers continued to grapple with perceived inequalities brought about by gender discrimination. She was not a professed feminist,⁴⁰ holding steadfastly to the belief that our humanity, not gender, was the link to the Creator, the Maker, the Shaper of Life, referencing the Trinity as the Idea, the Energy, and the Power.⁴¹ Dorothy Rowe probably didn't worry about the ideals of feminism, and Charis Barnett was a strong gender-friendly mother, more concerned with racial discrimination and anti-Semitism. Muriel Jaeger, it should be noted, gave clear indication of being a dedicated feminist, noting to Sayers that even the binding institution of heterosexual marriage was, by nature, distasteful to her.

Toward the end of the war, and after her youngest son, Miles, was killed in 1944, Charis Frankenburg returned to her Oxfordshire roots by moving to a small town closer to her other children. Dorothy Rowe visited frequently. Muriel was ill during the spring of 1944, and Bar as well as Susan moved in together once again, although Susan eventually moved out at the insistence of Bar. One cannot help but wonder at this arrangement, comprising decades of movement by Muriel and Bar, around the, admittedly curious, figure of Susan. Yet, the story is strangely compelling and invites some analysis of its own. All in all, it cannot have been an easy or pleasant domestic situation for any of the three. Moulton handles the narrative with commendable neutrality, although at times inserting a telling statement, such as that by Bar when Muriel expressed worry over Susan's future: "oh well . . . Susan has two fur coats . . . need one bother?" (271). One cannot help but wish that the narrative included more such pointed quotes from the participants.

The author ends the traumatic episode of the second world war, and its effects upon the separate and connected lives of the four MAS members, with the observation that, "Even as they looked forward, they were always aware of the sorrow, suffering, and even evil that were inextricable parts of human life" (271). The ever-present question of evil in relation to the reality of the *Inferno* is one that Sayers explores next.

³⁹ *The Man Born to Be King*, Gollancz, 1943. The title was taken from a fairy tale in the collection of Andrew Lang.

⁴⁰ In this case I define feminist as a person whose beliefs and behavior are based on feminism, which is the belief in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes and the movement organized around this belief.

⁴¹ For a full discussion of Sayers's terms, *The Idea*, *The Energy*, and *The Power* as they relate to the Trinity, see *The Mind of the Maker*, 1941.

The fifth, and final, part of *The Mutual Admiration Society* is titled "Masterworks and Legacies 1946-1988," further comprising two chapters, "Friendships and Triumphs" and "Legacies." The key word to "Friendships and Triumphs" is "reviving." After the displacements of war, the four friends, whose group has expanded now permanently to include Bar, slowly resumed communication and visits. Sayers made the decision to revive her scholarly interests and skills in translation by tackling Dante Alighieri's monumental *La Divina Commedia*. However, she wanted a different slant to the translation effort, one that paralleled her dialogue script in the *Life of Christ*⁴² broadcasts. She wished to create a translation of Dante that would be a welcome, recognizable, reading experience for the general population. So she embarked upon the translation effort as one in which the use of vernacular, daily, language took precedence in the English version. Furthermore, she wished to preserve Dante's scheme of couplet end rhymes within the epic poem. Not only did Sayers translate the *Inferno* (as *Hell*), *Purgatorio* (*Purgatory*), and part of the *Paradiso* (*Paradise*) in language understandable to the general English reader, but she rhymed the translation in English. This was quite a feat, to which Sayers was entirely equal,⁴³ but it was exhaustingly difficult work and took a toll on her physical health.

Sayers's early training in the structures of poetry and later pristine translations from medieval French of *The Song of Roland*⁴⁴ and *Tristan in Brittany*,⁴⁵ provided a strong foundation for her later Dante translations. DLS sent some of the unfinished work to Bar, an Italian scholar, for editing and comments. Bar was supportive and wrote back that reading Dorothy's rendering of Dante was "like somebody sitting there in an arm-chair and telling you a story" (Sayers, "And Telling You a Story" 1).

By that time, D. Rowe and Bar had retired from teaching and now were able to enjoy, at leisure, travel, art, literature, and involvement with the Bournemouth Theatre. In 1955, Muriel received the Most Excellent Order of the

⁴² Later published as *The Man Born to Be King*, Gollancz, 1943.

⁴³ Sayers's strong Oxford training in French medieval translation, under the supervision of Mildred Pope, prepared her well to tackle, even so much later, the related language of *La Divina Commedia*.

⁴⁴ *The Song of Roland*, the oldest extant epic poem in French written by an anonymous poet in the eleventh century and part of the "Songs of Deeds," was so finely translated by Sayers and published in 1957 that critics declared she could easily have received a Doctoral degree for her translation. That honor was not bestowed upon her, however.

⁴⁵ Sayers translated and published *The Romance of Tristan* by the twelfth-century poet, Thomas d'Angleterre, under the title *Tristan in Brittany* in 1929. Mildred Pope contributed editorial comments and revisions to Sayers's early translation effort.

British Empire (OBE) for her scholarship and historical work on the Lisle Letters (*TMAS* 285).⁴⁶

The author concludes a discussion of Muriel's long history by observing that the ghosts of the MAS were also as present in her writings as they were so entwined in her life. Even when Muriel's work was completed, "the pile of red and blue books on the desk still glows with life" (285). The author's careful consideration of endings, as well as beginnings, constitutes a tribute to the personal and professional life journey of each woman, and particularly to that of Muriel St. Clare Byrne.

"Who knows the last time they'll see a friend?" Mo Moulton asks in the final chapter to this woven history of four Oxford companions. It was brought home to the group with a lightning flash as Sayers died in December 1957 from a sudden heart attack. When hearing the news, Muriel traveled immediately to Dorothy's home in order to arrange the funeral and sort out her papers with Dorothy's son, John Anthony.

There is a photo on page 289 of four elderly women, two identified as Muriel St. Clare Byrne and Marjorie Barber. One of the other two is noted to be, possibly, Charis Barnett. By comparison to Charis's other photos, this appears to be almost certain. The one unidentified woman bears very strong resemblance to Dorothy H. Rowe, who is linking arms with her friend, Bar. Pictured so at the end, the women give us visual proof of the power and resounding strength of the bonds tying together four Somerville students who met as part of a writing circle at Oxford in the early century, and developed a strong testament of comradeship lasting throughout their mature lives.

Moulton concludes this collective history of enduring friendship entwining the lives of four, and more, Somerville women by bringing us full circle round to the purpose of the Mutual Admiration Society. It formed as a web of serious young writers who were equally concerned with producing good written work and critiquing one another's writing efforts. With these two principles always in sight, MAS members learned not only to develop a variety of writing skills but, in tandem, to hone literary critical thinking skills outside of the university classroom. Dorothy Sayers was most comfortable in the world of heroic poetry but was dragged, proverbially kicking and screaming, by the MAS circle (certainly by Muriel Jaeger), into the world of prose, and particularly toward that of the short story.⁴⁷ One early story by DLS was published in the

⁴⁶ Published in three volumes by the University of Chicago Press in 1982, the epic, *Lisle Letters*, was the monumental achievement of Byrne's scholarly life.

⁴⁷ DLS had written, previously, several plays while at Godolphin High School and earlier at home. However, other than academic exercises, short pieces of prose in the form of stories did not spark her interest at this point. From 1920, however, while living and

only issue of the *Blue Moon*, a journal of the MAS consisting of six pieces of writing, three of which belonged to Sayers. Hence, the experience of writing prose pushed Sayers out of her literary comfort zone, eventually resulting in the Wimsey books and toward her efforts in promoting the genre of detection as literature.

When considering various aspects of this academic literary society, one may find an intriguing parallel to the MAS, by virtue of its *raison d'être* and communal effect upon the Oxford writers, in the formation of the Inklings writing circle, founded by C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien.⁴⁸ Writers gravitate toward one another, and writing communities occur frequently in a university environment. The Inklings, themselves, adopted their name from a former Oxford student writing circle. However, roughly twenty-five years earlier than the formation of the Inklings at Oxford came the MAS, another lightly titled literary society with very similar intent and rationale to that of the Inklings: to share their own poems, stories and essays, to inspire one another by appreciation, analysis, and critique, sometimes severe, of one another's compositions, and to support one another in the friendship of their company. Furthermore, each society elected into membership only those people with whom they felt comfortable. They were, each group, serious about their writing and serious about one another's writings, yet discussed their work within an informal, sometimes argumentative, circle that was marked by stimulating conversation. They were friends of the spirit and mind.

Despite their similarities, the Inklings and the MAS reflected two distinct differences: status and gender. The nineteen canonical Inklings, led by C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien, were men secure within their professional lives in Oxford and its environs, secure within the closed Inklings circle, sharing mature poetry, prose, fantasy fiction, philosophical and religious essays, with their critical yet encouraging writing community. The MAS, founded much earlier, began, and remained, a student writing society composed entirely of women undergraduates at Somerville College; women who were only just beginning their adult lives and sought a safe haven, a place where "they could relax their guard" (Batson, *Her Oxford* 154), and one in which to present their burgeoning efforts of poetry, prose, plays, and essays for one another's critical evaluation. In order to more fully understand the literary links and growth among members of these two societies, further comparative analysis between them, as well as among other Oxford literary circles, may provide a fruitful direction of research.

working in London, she began to experiment seriously with the novel, eventually, in May 1923, publishing *Whose Body?* with Boni & Liveright, New York.

⁴⁸ See Prescott, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Mutual Admiration Society: Friendship and Creative Writing in an Oxford Women's Literary Group."

As noted by Moulton, friendship and bonds formed among the MAS circle which would affect both personal and professional futures. Diana Pavlac Glyer's work,⁴⁹ illuminating the writing circle as community among the Inklings, provides a firm foundation for future study.

Moulton's summation of the contributions to women's equality by various members of the MAS community, individually as well as collectively, reinforces the observation that belonging to the MAS helped to unite profound intellectual and emotional commitments among the women. The positive learning experience translated into effective problem solving later in life. Continued trust in each other's judgment allowed free discussion of their written work. Distribution for critique of their writings, as well as collaboration in literary projects, resulted in various partnerships between and among these women throughout life. They anchored one another through their friendship, enjoyment of each other's company, and honest communication, starting from the early, secure, days of the MAS at Somerville. Each of these four women possessed integrity of character, purpose, and opinion. In essence, these women had a firm foundation in one another. By those ties, the web of friendship and support would survive the ravages of injustice found elsewhere in society.

All this is well and good. However, we may also ask the hard question of whether Dorothy L. Sayers and the Mutual Admiration Society actually "remade the world for women," as Moulton notes in the subtitle. Regretfully, we must conclude that Sayers and members of the MAS did not remake, ultimately, the world for women, neither globally nor even within British society. Dorothy Sayers continued to argue for equality based on our common humanity until late in life when, finally, even she became disillusioned. Clearly, critical issues of injustice (discrepancies in salary, violence toward women, sexual exploitation) persist within the world of 2020 as they did in the world of 1920. Change occurs, slowly or in sudden leaps, yet it does occur. Women as well as men continue to work toward a global vision of mutual respect: gender, racial, or socio-economic. Still, even with regard to the serious efforts of the MAS women portrayed in *The Mutual Admiration Society, How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women*, Moulton's subtitle remains an optimistic overstatement.

However, these four women did contribute, by personal and professional effort, to the advancement of social and literary changes, some small, some greater, not only for women but also for men and children within the parameters of British society and within their spheres of influence in the arenas of literacy, education, and medical availability. They worked to change

⁴⁹ For an enlightening discussion of the influence upon one another's work by the Inklings circle of writers, see Glyer, *The Company They Keep* and *Bandersnatch*.

possibility. Certainly, they changed their own worlds. They also helped to promote social inclusivity within British society: Dorothy by refocusing literary and religious language use, Charis by revising early education methodology, D. Rowe by modernizing the amateur theatre, and Muriel by making the Elizabethan world available to the modern reader.⁵⁰ Perhaps the subtitle to this book could have been rephrased as “worked to remake,” or “worked to reshape,” neither as striking, perhaps, but certainly more attuned to historical occurrence as well as being a more accurate reflection of Sayers’ own philosophical outlook, religious belief, and personal mythology.

A second feature of the book which this reviewer found disquieting was the exclusion, or scarce mention, of strong early MAS members such as Margaret Amy Chubb (Pyke). Questioned, as well, is the typecasting of Muriel Jaeger and Marjorie Barber as secondary characters in the history of the MAS subset. In fact, the entire casting of characters into main and secondary appears to have been an unnecessary categorization, tending rather toward exclusivity, and inclining the reader toward judgment before the story was underway. None of the secondary characters, assuredly, thought of herself as such within the circle of the MAS, nor in reference to the chosen four. By this feature of categorization, or exclusion, the four members may be considered, at times, more representative of a Mutual Admiration Sorority rather than Society. The formal MAS writing circle grew to be fairly large, at times numbering twelve or more students, lasting into the late teens of the century for remaining students, such as D. Rowe, and later incorporating new members, such as Winifred Holtby and Doreen Wallace.⁵¹

The society was not dominated throughout its existence by the four members chosen as main characters, but certainly they were among the founders of the MAS, a strong subset of the society, and a force within it. After leaving Oxford, each woman continued to identify, personally, with

⁵⁰ Recommended are *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country* (1925), and *The Elizabethan Home* (1930). Also recommended for an intimate look at Byrne’s youth is her autobiography, *Common or Garden Child: A Not-Unfaithful Record* (1942). Byrne’s autobiography is a study in retrospection through the eyes of a child who notices every detail of life around her and reacts to it all with a child’s clear insight as well as unfettered emotion. Unfortunately, the book ends just as Muriel, with maturing perspective, is leaving for Oxford. In this reviewer’s opinion, that should have been the place where the book began.

⁵¹ DLS and Doreen Wallace became close friends in 1917 when Dorothy moved back to the city of Oxford, and Doreen Wallace occupied a room in the city, two blocks from Sayers, while she attended Somerville College, there being a lack of available rooms on campus. Doreen belonged to the later MAS, and Dorothy resumed some contact with the society at this time. Sayers encouraged members of the later circle to submit poetry and prose to Oxford Poetry, a publication by Basil Blackwell for which she was an editor in 1917-1919. DLS and Doreen also became informal writing partners for a short period in 1917-18.

membership in the MAS. It was one of the defining experiences of their Somerville student tenure. The common threads of literature and scholarship, first shared through the MAS, acted to bind, against the cataclysmic forces of war, the personal and professional lives of these four women. Together, they closed ranks against the evils of destruction, cruelty, and chaos.

A compelling feature of the book is found in Moulton's insightful writing style which communicates an affectionate thoughtfulness toward each woman's story. In a sense, Moulton enters the narrative, looking outwardly from the eyes of each woman as the author may have considered, in personal perspective, that life. Furthermore, the reader is invited to share the encounter. We understand these women, having recognized their experiences in our own stories and sometimes in the life stories of those around us.

The narrative structure as a series of episodic vignettes through time, alternately focusing on one or more of the main characters, is also a welcome feature of the book which helps to maintain a flow of interest as the reader moves from one chapter to the next. Furthermore, each chapter is structured as a link in the web, allowing easy transition between substories. The author keeps the umbrella of the MAS to the forefront throughout the book as a cohesive element within the sometimes widely variant episodes.

The Mutual Admiration Society: How Dorothy L. Sayers and Her Oxford Circle Remade the World for Women is a commendable and fascinating book, highlighting the author's unique approach to the collective history of four remarkable MAS women. This book is important, as well, for the amount of hitherto untapped information the author includes about each character in the story. Noteworthy are new facts, garnered through correspondence and letters, clarifying the lives of Dorothy Hanbury Rowe and Muriel St. Clare Byrne. The research is formidable and precise. Certain information presented may not be everyone's cup of tea with regard to previously ignored details of personal gender affiliation and partnership choices. A reader would be hard put to find elsewhere explicit references to Muriel St. Clare Byrne and Marjorie Barber's lesbian relationship. Yet, the subject is clearly and uneventfully discussed here. By so doing, Moulton has remained true to the role of accurate historian.

We may ponder, however, whether we, so far removed from the private lives of these women, have the right to know the personal details of those lives. Certainly they were never meant for us. It remains an open question. Still, gender issues have surfaced as critical topics in current society, and their roots as well as history will continue to be explored in order more fully to understand ourselves and our own histories linked to those extraordinary women who preceded us.

The MAS women would have understood, and perhaps even sympathized with, our interest in their lives as Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Dorothy H. Rowe, Marjorie M. Barber, Charis Barnett Frankenburg, Muriel Jaeger, and Dorothy L. Sayers, themselves, studied the detail of precedent lives. Moulton has returned a measure of immortality to these women of the MAS. Their stories, separate and linked, involving discovery, joy, tragedy, triumph, and strength of commitment, remain a beacon to provide light for our own paths, uncertain or true, in this century. Expressed with pointed clarity by Dorothy L. Sayers, as she was prone to consider the various ways we avoid acting to tackle inconveniences given us in this life, “we build up a defence mechanism against self-questioning, because, to tell the truth, we are very much afraid of ourselves” (Sayers, “What Do We Believe?” 17). Despite such fears, the women of the MAS shaped their lives, individually and collectively, as a testament to strength of purpose, not only with respect to their gender, but as fully invested members of humanity.

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