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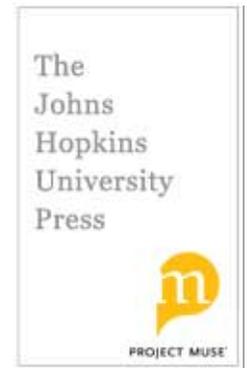
Queerness at Shrewsbury: Homoerotic Desire in Gaudy Night

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**QUEERNESS AT SHREWSBURY:  
HOMOEROTIC DESIRE IN *GAUDY  
NIGHT***

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**Marya McFadden**

Best known as the author of the popular Lord Peter Wimsey mystery series of the 1920s and 1930s, Dorothy L. Sayers is not usually included among the ranks of British novelists whose innovations and insights contributed to the creation of a distinct "modernist" sensibility that challenged traditional structures of reasoning and hierarchy in the early part of the twentieth century. However, feminist criticism of recent years has wisely cautioned against the valorization of modernism's intellectual and artistic avant-garde as the most subversive or resistant aspect of modern culture, for to do so problematically privileges an elite cadre of predominantly male or upper-class writers. While modern criticism has tended to acclaim the progressive politics of the experimental texts that now comprise the modernist canon, it has done so at the expense of other popular aspects of modern culture which present different types of interventions into dominant social practices.<sup>1</sup> Sayers, while among the intellectually elite members of modern British culture by virtue of her Oxford education, chose to write popular detective fiction

(at least early in her career), and as a consequence, her unique contributions to the radical politics and artistic innovations frequently associated with the modern era have often been overlooked. In the following analysis, I suggest that the most provocative of those contributions may be found in the 1936 novel *Gaudy Night*, a text deserving closer scrutiny for the ways in which it utilizes a genre with mass cultural appeal in order to enact a potent critique of patriarchal culture and its attendant policing of gender and sexual identity.

Similar to the more canonical "high modernist" novels, *Gaudy Night* attempts to experiment with generic form. In this text, however, it is the popular genre of detective fiction that serves as the vehicle for Sayers's experimentations with the use of violence to deconstruct gender and sexual norms. Violence, of course, is an inherently integral element of detective fiction, with murder being the most popular plot premise. Yet Sayers uses violence in *Gaudy Night* as a pretense for exploring the homoerotic desires and fears that surface at a women's college when an anonymous aggressor is presumed to be a woman driven mad with sexual repression. The text becomes effectively "queer," a work in which gender and sexuality are deconstructed to unleash a play of polymorphously perverse possibilities. In addition to exploring Sayers's thematic use of violence, my analysis of the novel will explore how her experimentation within the detective fiction genre may be read as an act of aggression that strategically parallels the text's subversive content on the level of form. Ultimately, both the thematic and the formal violence of the text work together to challenge yet a different type of cultural violence: systemic gender and sexual domination.

Shrewsbury, the fictitious name Sayers chooses for the Oxford women's college in which the novel is set, serves as a locus for modern anxieties about changing gender relations. The dawn of the twentieth century in Britain brought voting and property rights for women, who were increasingly moving out of Victorian domesticity and into the public sphere of cultural and economic life. Sayers, for instance, was among the first women to receive an Oxford education. These changes in the social structure of gender hierarchy posed a threat to the dominant sexual order as well, for increased sexual liberation accompanied women's unprecedented social freedom and thus jeopardized traditional sexual standards.<sup>2</sup> At Shrewsbury College, home to those women who reject

traditional marriage and motherhood in favor of what was formerly the exclusively male privilege of pursuing an academic career, the anxiety over these changes manifests itself in representations of erotic aggression that serve to unsettle not only conventional categories of gender identity, but of sexuality as well. Gender analysis that asks what it means to be constructed as a "man" or as a "woman" in society implicitly problematizes what it means to be constructed as a "heterosexual" as well, for as Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, "the institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from the feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (23). In *Gaudy Night*, anxieties about gender roles give rise to anxieties about sexuality, and violence provides a narrative occasion for exploring the fantasies and fears evoked by eroticism not contained within conventional binary constructions.

The aggression implicit in the generic conventions of detective fiction functions in *Gaudy Night* to "queer" the format in such a way that lesbian desire is both encoded and placed under erasure in the narrative. When an outbreak of vandalism, threatening missives, and physical attacks occurs at an Oxford women's college, the perpetrator is determined to be one of its women residents. Feminist critics such as Lynda Hart have articulated how the figure of the lesbian has historically accompanied cultural representations of violent women.<sup>3</sup> In her book, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression*, for example, Hart draws on discourses of criminology, sexology, and psychoanalysis, as well as texts extending from the nineteenth-century novel to contemporary film and performance art, to argue that the figure of the lesbian serves as the "silent escort" of violent women, operating in a dialectic of "appearance/disappearance" in representations of aggressive women (x). While the erasure of the lesbian serves to maintain institutional heterosexuality, her appearance nonetheless works to denaturalize that institution; furthermore, the queer resistance of this dialectical representation to remain unambiguously located in either the heterosexual or homosexual camp functions narratively to destabilize that division.

The plot of *Gaudy Night* is set in motion when protagonist Harriet Vane, herself a successful mystery novelist, is motivated to return to her alma mater, Shrewsbury College at Oxford, to attend its annual

celebratory Gaudy Dinner. What lures her back to the campus for the first time since her graduation ten years ago is the "urgent entreaty" (2) of a former "intimate friend" (9) and classmate, Mary Stokes, who has fallen ill and desires to see Harriet one more time before undergoing a dangerous operation. I will argue that as the mystery on the campus unfolds, the story suggests that perhaps Harriet has previously avoided returning to the college because it represents for her a reminder of intimacy between women, and therefore poses a threat to the heteronormative identity that she has attempted to establish in the intervening years.

Readers learn that Harriet was the subject of a scandal in one of Sayers's earlier novels for her suspected role in the poisoning death of her male lover, a man with whom she had lived, but refused to marry, despite the substantial social disapprobation for such an arrangement at that time. Harriet had been cleared of the charges by Sayers's best-known detective creation, Lord Peter Wimsey, who later proposed to her himself. *Gaudy Night* finds Peter repeating his matrimonial proposals at regular intervals, always to be denied. Harriet's rationale for refusing to marry both her first lover and Peter is reported by the narrator to be her fear of losing her independence, a fear which was certainly not unfounded given the marital constraints imposed upon women of her time. The repeated articulation of this fear furthermore testifies to the novel's feminist politics, for Sayers is clearly concerned about the loss of women's autonomy that frequently accompanies marriage. Nonetheless, when considered in conjunction with the allusions to lesbian desires and anxieties that surface throughout the entire narrative, Harriet's reluctance to marry assumes additional significance as a possible indication of ambivalence regarding her sexuality.

This ambivalence proves to be the source of much anxiety for Harriet upon her return to Shrewsbury, which for her represents a return of the repressed. Having distanced herself from Oxford by both years and miles in an attempt to deny what may be her own homoerotic desires, Harriet grows threatened by their re-emergence at the Gaudy. Sayers displaces the psychological threat of lesbianism onto the physical threat of violence manifested in the poison pen vandal, whose harassment of the college community coincides with Harriet's return. The first evidence that Harriet's sexual repression is linked to the poison pen's

potential for violence surfaces when she discovers an obscene drawing in the college quad following the Gaudy dinner: "It was ugly and sadistic. It depicted a naked figure of exaggeratedly feminine outlines, inflicting savage and humiliating outrage upon some person of indeterminate gender clad in a cap and gown" (38). Harriet's response to the drawing is noteworthy for the degree to which it unsettles her: "Harriet stared at it for a little time in disgust, while a number of questions formed themselves in her mind. Then she took it upstairs with her into the nearest lavatory, dropped it in and pulled the plug on it. That was the proper fate for such things, and there was an end of it; but for all that, she wished she had not seen it" (38). As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Harriet has not been able to "pull the plug" so easily on the psychic anxieties—whether of desire or fear—the image has evoked in her, and that it is responsible for "a number of questions" that now haunt her mind.

While the details of the "savage and humiliating outrage" depicted are left otherwise unspecified, the drawing clearly represents an act of sexualized brutality. The threatening figure is a naked woman, one of "exaggeratedly feminine outlines," suggesting that the danger is associated with exaggerated or unleashed female sexuality. That the victim is clad in cap and gown indicates that this danger is heightened in the academic environment at Shrewsbury, an exclusively female environment in which women live and work together in close quarters. The fact that the victim is of "indeterminate gender" also suggests a number of interesting possibilities that Sayers chooses to keep in play, both for Harriet and for the reader: if the victim is a woman—as might be expected of a member of a female college—the drawing might signify the threatening nature of the homosexual possibilities at the women's college; if the victim is androgynous, as Harriet is, it could serve as a warning about the sexual dangers of repudiating her traditional feminine role; if the victim is a man, it might represent either a lesbian fantasy of violently ridding the Oxford environment of men in order to have full sexual access to its women, or the heterosexual male sadomasochistic fantasy of being dominated by a phallic woman.

Ultimately, Sayers resolves through Peter Wimsey that the drawing represents none of these possibilities, but rather one woman's antifeminist view of the unjust brutality inflicted upon male academics by educated women who refuse their "natural" gender assignments. As such, it

is the work of Annie Wilson, a college scout seeking revenge on women academics for the suicide of her husband following one Miss de Vine's exposure of his falsified thesis—and its subsequent rejection. Yet despite the narrative mechanisms propelling the surface plot of the poison pen mystery, if one takes seriously Sayers's own acknowledgment that the novel is "almost entirely psychological" with only a "mild detective interest" (Reynolds 254), the psychic possibilities at play in the minds of both Harriet and the reader become much more relevant than the final "whodunnit" rationale. It then follows that if Harriet Vane, the Oxford educated, feminist, successful author of murder mysteries, who has defied social convention by cohabiting with her lover, "wishes she had not seen" the obscene drawing in question, her discomfort is less likely the result of the shock to her delicate sensibilities than its unsettling evocation of repressed desires and anxieties—desires and anxieties which, as I will show, center around the specter of female homoeroticism.

Following Harriet's discovery of the drawing, Sayers points out that "the episode had troubled and unsettled her" (52). Then, in a scene noteworthy in that its sole function seems to be to provide a suggestive glimpse into Harriet's psyche, she gazes at a portrait of the founder of the college and fantasizes about this rather "queer" woman, whose legacy perhaps has awakened Harriet's own queer sensibility: "She stopped to stare at the portrait of that Mary, Countess of Shrewsbury, in whose honor the college had been founded. The painting was a well-executed modern copy of the one in St. John's College, Cambridge, and the queer, strong-featured face, with its ill-tempered mouth and sidelong, secretive glance, had always exercised a curious fascination over her" (53). The Countess's "strong-featured" face recalls the description of Harriet's own androgynous features, and Sayers's association of its "queer"-ness with its "secretive glance" hints enigmatically at the source of Harriet's "fascination" with its possible secret.

Although the term "queer" retains its traditional meaning of "odd" or "unconventional" in this passage, ample evidence suggests as well that by 1936, Sayers would have been familiar with the use of the term to connote same-sex object choice. She was, after all, a highly educated author living in London, acquainted with the Bloomsbury Group, in the post-Oscar Wilde, post-Radclyffe Hall cultural era. In *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, a historical study of lesbian life in the twentieth century,

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Lillian Faderman illustrates that by the 1920s, "queer" had joined the popular lexicon to refer to homosexuality in both men and women: "as one Broadway gossip sheet of the 1920s announced in a headline: '6000 Crowd Huge Hall as Queer Men and Women Dance'" (66). According to the etymology of "queer" delineated in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, by 1922 even the American government (hardly the forefront of the cultural avant-garde) was using the word "queer" as a synonym for homosexuality.<sup>4</sup>

While I suggest that Sayers constructs the possibility that Harriet suspects the Countess of being a lesbian, and that this is a source of fascination, I find the significance of this "queer" passage to lie more in that notion of *possibility* than in a determinate lesbian identity for both the Countess and Harriet. Eve K. Sedgwick's analysis of the broader significance of the term proves informative here. Sedgwick does not deny the importance of retaining the simple associations of "queer" with same-sex sexual expression, arguing that "for anyone to disavow those meanings, or to displace them from the term's definitional center, would be to dematerialize any possibility of queerness itself" (8). However, she explains how recent theoretical discourse has brought greater resonance to the term, so that now "one of the things that 'queer' can refer to [is] the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically" (8). Thus, it would be irrelevant, and in fact counterproductive, to argue that the portrait passage should be read as marking either Harriet or the Countess "as a lesbian"; in accordance with Sedgwick, they are "queer" precisely because their gender and sexuality resist such monolithic interpretation.

And to the degree that Sayers has succeeded in "queering" both characters, rather than simply "coding" them as lesbians, she also, by implication, queers *all* of the women academics at Shrewsbury who have been influenced by the legacy of the countess (whose name, Mary, suggests an interesting parallel with Harriet's "intimate friend" Mary Stokes). Harriet recalls that the Countess was "something of a holy terror; uncontrollable by her menfolk, undaunted by the Tower, contemptuously silent before the Privy Council, an obstinate recusant, a staunch friend but an implacable enemy and a lady with a turn for invective remarkable even in an age when few mouths suffered from mealiness" (53).

After painting this glowing psychological portrait of a woman who certainly defied gender expectations, Harriet concludes that the Countess "seemed, in fact, to be the epitome of every alarming quality which a learned woman is popularly credited with developing" (53). Undoubtedly, Harriet regards the Countess's queerness as among these alarming qualities. Sayers thus connects the potential for queer sexuality that defies easy categorization with the defiance of gender role categorization that characterizes all of the women at Shrewsbury, and with the "menfolk"'s sense of a psychic violation of their turf.

In this context, "Shrewsbury" is hardly a name to pass unremarked. Although it refers to an actual English town, Sayers's choice of the word to denote her fictitious Oxford women's college contains, like much of the rest of her narrative, layers of connotation. The *Random House College Dictionary* defines a shrew as "a woman of violent temper and speech; virago"; the same source provides the archaic definition of "virago" as "a woman of masculine strength or spirit." On the most obvious level, Sayers is having some feminist fun with a tongue-in-cheek appropriation of the stereotypical view of academic women that Harriet finds embodied in Countess Mary. The narrative's explicit rationale for why the poison pen's letters and vandalism are so dangerous to the college is because they threaten to reinforce this stereotype to the outside world. On a more subtle level, however, the word's association between women, violence, and masculinity becomes more provocative if one sees Sayers to be employing violence rhetorically in the narrative to deconstruct normative categories of gender and sexuality.

With the outbreak of the poison pen campaign, Shrewsbury becomes a queer environment where both Harriet and the reader must suspect each woman as a potential aggressor and, hence, as a potential lesbian. Harriet imagines the scandal that would ensue if the lurid details of the poison pen's letters and drawings were to become public knowledge and feed suspicions about "what lived in academic towers" (80): "'Soured virginity'—'unnatural life'—'semi-demented spinsters'—'starved appetites and suppressed impulses'—'unwholesome atmosphere'—she could think of whole sets of epithets, ready-minted for circulation. Was this what lived in the tower set on the hill?" (78).

This last question lingers in the mind of Harriet, of all of the women at the college, and ultimately of the reader throughout the five hundred-

page narrative. The actual letter writer, the rabidly antifeminist Annie, reiterates it when she observes, "But it seems to me a dreadful thing to see all these unmarried ladies living together. It isn't natural, is it?" (127) and continues, "But some of these clever ladies are a bit queer, don't you think, madame?" (128).

The detective fiction genre serves quite aptly and ingeniously to seduce both those within and outside the narrative with the thrilling proximity to danger that comes from wondering not only, "Who is scribbling these obscene drawings and writing these threatening letters?" but more importantly, "Why is (s)he doing it? Is (s)he a lesbian driven mad with repressed desire?" When Harriet agrees to return to the college to investigate the scandal, she deliberately puts herself in the position to become a "victim" of what she suspects is just that: a repressed lesbian. It is a possibility that both frightens and empowers her. She might be physically harmed—and indeed she is eventually attacked—by the aggressor; on the other hand, she can justifiably indulge in otherwise forbidden fantasies about the sexuality of all the women at Shrewsbury. Readers of crime fiction generally derive a rather voyeuristic pleasure in the suspense of danger, fantasizing (from a safe distance) who might have "done it" and why; this pleasure takes on homoerotic valences within the queer possibilities constructed in *Gaudy Night*.

In the essay "Detecting a Novel Use for Spinsters," Catherine Kenney suggests, "Perhaps the murder mystery itself, with its titillating and faintly erotic insinuations of forbidden action and information, is just a stylized sublimation of the sex drive" (131). Yet *Gaudy Night* cannot properly be called a murder mystery, since no murder ever occurs; we suspect that it will, for that is the genre Sayers became famous for writing and to which all of the other "Lord Peter Wimsey Mysteries" conform. Lord Peter himself does not even appear until three hundred pages into the narrative; Harriet Vane is the primary detective and interest in this story. Sayers thus seduces the reader with the conventions of the Lord Peter murder mystery, and then proceeds to violate that genre by refusing to produce either a murder or Lord Peter. This dynamic of genre seduction and violation suggests a self-consciousness on Sayers's part regarding the erotic component that Kenney finds to be constitutive of the murder mystery, and an experimentation with it that amounts to an act of formalist violence. In doing away with the murder aspect of the

mystery, Sayers substitutes a different brand of "forbidden action" with "titillating and [more than] faintly erotic insinuations": the uncontained possibilities of lesbian sexuality. In substituting Harriet for Peter as the detective who must ferret out the mysterious secret at Shrewsbury, Sayers raises the stakes involved in both the potential danger and the potential pleasure of pursuing this particular suspect.

To argue that Sayers "plays" with polymorphously perverse narrative possibilities in *Gaudy Night* recalls Jacques Derrida's influential essay "Structure, Sign, and Play," in which he articulates the poststructuralist notion of a decentered text with no originary "truth" of interpretation; the result is a field of "freeplay" of "infinite substitutions," or "supplemental" meanings for any given sign (160). Miriam Brody explains how Sayers's novel is explicitly concerned with possibilities at play in the reading of signs:

Detective fiction is prototypically semiotic. The sign-reading detective deciphers a text of signs, foremost among which is the crime itself, signs no one claims to have written, signs which are apparently, then, unauthored. Indeed the cast of characters to whom one may wish to impute the work of such sign-reading loudly denies authorship. The real writer, the malefactor, is an absent presence through most of a work of detective fiction. (94)

As such, it matters little that Annie is ultimately revealed to have authored the poison pen signs, or that her rather conventional motivation is the desire to avenge her husband's death. Throughout the bulk of the narrative, everyone can be read as the possible author/culprit, and any number of possible motives ascribed to them.

The psychological element that Sayers saw as the primary concern of her novel thus resides in Harriet's role as the text's sign-reader, whose readings are necessarily structured by her own desires. Brody acknowledges the influence of Harriet's libido on her role as detective: "Tormented, and deeply suspicious of sexual life, Harriet searches for the Poltergeist and sees in the signs only the reflection of her own profound confusion" (98). Brody labels Harriet's readings as "misreadings" because they do not lead her to deduce that Annie is the poison pen, and notes that "[f]inally, she calls in Peter Wimsey for help" (98) in solving the

mystery. However, while Harriet's suspicions may be "misreadings" on the most obvious level of the mystery plot, I would argue that they compose precisely the subversive substance of the narrative, which by Sayers's own admission was only marginally an interest in detection.

In effect, I argue that Harriet displaces her own desires onto the poison pen culprit and consequently presumes her to be motivated by repressed homoeroticism. One of her chief suspects is the history tutor, Miss Hillyard, who is the most candid of the senior scholars in her dislike of men, and thus a likely candidate to be harboring lesbian tendencies. Following a bitter disparagement of marriage by Miss Hillyard, Harriet observes to her, "You don't seem to have a very high opinion of men—of the male character, I mean, as such," to which Miss Hillyard concurs (55). The history tutor goes on to criticize the institutional sexism found not only in marriage, but in academia as well. Perhaps Miss Hillyard's vocal disdain for the male gender disconcerts Harriet so much because she recognizes in it her own doubts about heterosexuality, marriage, and the division of gender roles: "Something funny there, thought Harriet. A personal history, probably. How difficult it was not to be embittered by personal experience. She went down to the J. C. R. and examined herself in the mirror. There had been a look in the History Tutor's eyes that she did not wish to discover in her own" (55). A look of identification, perhaps? One that Harriet was afraid to find mirrored in her own unconscious? Much later in the novel, Harriet deduces that Peter's presence at the college and his relationship with her evokes a bitter jealousy in Miss Hillyard because the history tutor is attracted to him; I would suggest, however, that perhaps the object of her attraction is Harriet, not Peter, and on some unconscious level, Harriet is afraid of finding similar homoerotic desire mirrored in herself.

Harriet's projects her fantasies onto all of the women at Shrewsbury. At dinner after discovering the initial drawing, "Harriet kept on asking herself, Which? Which of all these normal and cheerful-looking women had dropped that unpleasant paper in the quad the night before? Because you never knew; and the trouble of not knowing was that you dimly suspected everybody" (50). Harriet's ruminations bring to mind D. A. Miller's analysis of how connotation functions narratively to raise homosexual meaning that is always capable of being "elided even as it is also being elaborated" (124); following Miller's logic, the homosexual

possibilities underlying Harriet's suspicions, while not explicitly articulated, serve to "raise the ghost [of homosexuality] all over the place" (125). Sayers may thus be seen to be opening up a textual field of freeplay in which every woman at the college may be substituted as the possible author of the signs. The Dean reinforces what Derrida would call the supplemental nature of the narrative, as well as the sexual nature of the possible interpretations at play, when she comments to Harriet that the culprit "might even be one of ourselves. That's what's so horrible. Yes, I know—elderly virgins, and all that" (79). The narrative play invites both Harriet and the reader to fantasize about the identity and the motivations of the party responsible for the queer doings at Shrewsbury.

Not only does Miss Hillyard become "a little twisted" (57) in Harriet's imagination, but the entire college environment becomes shadowed with eroticism and ambiguity. When the poison pen strikes again by vandalizing the new library, Harriet checks her first instinct to look for paint-stained clothing by imagining the culprit to have carried out her mischief in the nude, a speculation which reinforces the erotic nature of the aggression, at least in Harriet's (and the reader's) fantasy (123). The English tutor, Miss Lydgate, remarks on the startling habit of the present undergraduates to sunbathe scantily clad in undergarments, and one wonders if this is a "clue" to the English tutor's repressed sexual fixation. The new Research Fellow, Miss de Vine, reveals a desire to be alone with Harriet and professes an admiration for the protagonist's detachment. She remarks, "Detachment is a rare virtue, and very few people find it lovable [...]. If you ever find a person who likes you in spite of it—still more, because of it—that liking has very great value, because it is perfectly sincere, and because, with that person, you will never need to be anything but sincere yourself" (36-37). One wonders if this is a "clue" to Miss de Vine's attraction to Harriet, a suspicion that is only augmented when Harriet replies, "I disconcert myself very much. I never know what I do feel" (37). The remark recalls Brody's observation about Harriet's "profound confusion" regarding sexual life. Has she been so "disconcerted" because she senses the possibility of a mutual attraction between herself and Miss de Vine? Miss de Vine responds to Harriet's confusion by arguing, "I don't think that matters, provided one doesn't try to persuade one's self into appropriate feelings" (37). In the context of an atmosphere of unleashed homoerotic desire, Miss de Vine's remark

might be read as an invitation to Harriet to join her in resisting the social imperative to adopt an "appropriate" heteronormative identity.

The link between the poison pen vandal's aggression and the potential for queer sexuality is clearly constructed in the content of the threats made on campus. Sayers often chooses not to reveal the explicit nature of the poison pen letters, preferring instead to keep the possibilities at play in the narrative, but she does hint on a couple of occasions that they contain a consistent antimale theme, and that the writer has knowledge of some perverse secret about the recipient. In describing the letters, Sayers only vaguely explains, "There were a number of messages, addressed to various members of the S. C. R., and informing them, with various disagreeable epithets, that their sins would find them out, that they were not fit for decent society and that unless they left men alone, various unpleasing things would occur to them" (85). The precise nature of these "sins" which would render the offenders unfit for decent society, like so much of the narrative, may only be speculated upon, but like the obscene drawings, the inference is clearly sexual. Sayers seems to desire both Harriet and the reader to interpret these messages as signs that the writer either has projected her homoerotic fantasies onto the objects of the letters, or has actual firsthand knowledge of some sexual experience of theirs and desires to eliminate any possible heterosexual claims to their affection. Such an interpretation is further invited when Lord Peter's nephew, Saint-George, reveals to Harriet that he has been accosted in the college garden by the "ghost" haunting Shrewsbury, and after demanding, "Which of 'em do you want?" she warns him to "go away. We murder beautiful boys like you and eat their hearts out" (223).

Saint-George's reference to the poison pen author who seeks to drive men away from the college as a "ghost" is only one of many such references throughout the narrative. In Saint-George's description, this apparition "popped out from behind a bush" in the garden and grabbed him; dressed all in black, she had "beastly" eyes and a "horrid voice, like glue," and she was "uncommonly strong" (222-23). At various other points in the story, the phantom-like vandal who mysteriously appears and disappears is referred to as "ghost" or "poltergeist." People catch a glimpse of her in a lighted window, and then she is gone before anyone can enter the room. She seems to glide like a specter in and out of college buildings, turning off all the lights and managing to evade the throngs of inhabitants

who pursue her. "'It's the Poltergeist,' said somebody. 'Let's catch her this time,' said somebody else" (205), goes the refrain of the haunted inhabitants of Shrewsbury, yet the apparition always proves elusive.

The ghost metaphors used to designate the campus culprit suggest further evidence that the danger she embodies is the threat of lesbian sexuality, for according to Terry Castle, western literature since the Enlightenment has invoked the figure of the ghost to represent the simultaneous absence and presence of lesbianism. Castle argues that "in nearly all of the art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, lesbianism, or its possibility, can only be represented to the degree that it is simultaneously 'derealized' through a blanching authorial infusion of spectral metaphors" (34). Sayers's representation of the poison pen writer Annie as a "poltergeist" figure, then, follows in a literary tradition of authors who can only suggest the possibility of lesbianism by disembodiment in the ethereal guise of the ghost. However, Castle argues that despite the "insubstantiality" and "not-there-ness" of the apparitional lesbian, she is a figure who functions strategically as a reminder of precisely that possibility (46). By "haunting" our literary heritage with her persistent apparitional appearance and disappearance, she embodies a lesbian existence that is always present, lurking perhaps in the shadows or just around the next corner. Castle explains:

The spectral figure is a perfect vehicle for conveying what must be called—though without a doubt paradoxically—that "recognition through negation" which has taken place with regard to female homosexuality in Western culture since the Enlightenment. Over the past three hundred years, I would like to suggest, the metaphor has functioned as the necessary psychological and rhetorical means for objectifying—and ultimately embracing—that which could not otherwise be acknowledged. (60)

Presenting the suspected troublemaker of *Gaudy Night* metaphorically as a ghost may be read as yet another narrative strategy that Sayers employs to acknowledge the possibility of lesbian desire that emerges simultaneously with the danger on campus.

The aggressive actions initiated by the poison pen culprit—threatening letters, obscene drawings, vandalized classrooms and books, mutilated

dummies hanging in the chapel, people accosted frighteningly in the garden, an undergraduate tormented to the brink of suicide, and finally, life-threatening attacks on Harriet and Miss de Vine—serve as the narrative occasions for the possibility of lesbianism to surface at Shrewsbury. That which has been repressed cannot be admitted or acknowledged outright, but it can be implied through the spectral appearances, innuendoes, and inferences occasioned by the threatening presence of the poison pen. Indeed, Hart, employing the same spectral metaphor as Castle, argues that lesbianism is a "haunting secret" that has accompanied western cultural representations of aggressive women since the Victorian era. Hart explains that "one ghost in the machine of heterosexual patriarchy is the lesbian who shadows the entrance into representation of women's aggression" (ix). In constructing the poison pen "poltergeist" of Shrewsbury as a possible lesbian throughout the majority of her narrative, Sayers is thus, in one respect, conforming to the prevalent discursive models of her time which displaced women's aggression onto sexual deviancy.

In another respect, however, Sayers seems to challenge what Hart calls the "banal" and "pervasive" history in which "[l]esbians in mainstream representations have almost always been depicted as predatory, dangerous, and pathological" (x), because ultimately the Shrewsbury ghost is revealed to be motivated not by lesbian desire, but by antifeminist, heterosexual vengeance. Annie, the actual perpetrator, believes that it is "unnatural" for women to usurp a "man's role" in the academic, professional arena; she blames all women academics for her husband's suicide, and thus she instigates the vandalism at Shrewsbury in an attempt to bring public scandal and ruin upon the college. If anyone is demented, Sayers implies, it is sexist ideologues such as Annie who would restore rigid, traditional gender boundaries in an era when women were just beginning to cross them in places like Shrewsbury. Annie's aggression, then, may be seen to signify the violence of a patriarchal order that has not hesitated to use physical, psychological, legal, and economic force to maintain its dominance.

Furthermore, while Annie ideologically professes to be motivated by the desire to return women to their "proper place" in the home, ironically she herself is appropriating the masculine prerogative of aggression in her tactics. Thus, while she is not revealed to be a lesbian, in

a sense Sayers does succeed in "queering" her, for as Hart explains, "what is particularly pertinent for lesbian historians and theorists to remember is that the female invert's *aggressiveness* was what marked her as deviant and therefore dangerous, *not* her object choice. As [George] Chauncey has argued, it was the invert's usurpation of masculine privilege that defined her sexuality" (9).

Even though Annie is purported to lack same-sex sexual desire, her aggression "masculinizes" her, thus positioning her in the same "ambivalent position in the symbolic order" as the lesbian (x). This irony is not lost on Virginia B. Morris, who argues that "Annie never recognizes that she has become exactly what she despises: a woman who is doing a man's job" (493). Much like Phyllis Schlafly, who in the 1970s built a successful career out of telling American women they shouldn't have careers, Annie is a hypocrite whom Sayers surely delights in using to deconstruct those same gender and sexual taxonomies that the character's own narrow mind endeavors to enforce.

Whereas Castle argues that the ghost of the lesbian operates paradoxically to ensure the "recognition through negation" of lesbian existence, Hart voices a different claim:

I am not developing this negativity [about the lesbian ghost in the shadows of representations of aggressive women] in the interest of making lesbians visible. Rather, I demonstrate some discursive maneuvers in which the production of violent women in representation depends on a dis-articulated threat of desire between women. It is not a matter, then, of looking for the lesbian *behind* representations of violent women, but rather of understanding how the lesbian functions in a structural dialectic of appearance/disappearance where the aggressive woman is visible. The lesbian (dis)appears in the masculine imaginary so that the violent woman can ascend to her place in the phallographic symbolic. (x)

In other words, while Castle finds the ghost-like presence of the lesbian to be a strategic trope for maintaining lesbian visibility, Hart finds the apparitional nature of the lesbian who disappears behind the image of the violent woman to function more to "defuse the full force" of the threat of lesbian desire to the dominant social order. She argues that the

recurrence of lesbian sexuality as the ghost behind aggressive women reflects "a profoundly paranoid heterosexist/patriarchal culture that persistently and ostentatiously exhibits and produces its necessary other in order to keep it under erasure" (ix).

On one level, it is possible to read the apparitional lesbian who haunts the image of the Shrewsbury suspect throughout most of *Gaudy Night* as a narrative device that is ultimately used to reinscribe that heterosexist/patriarchal culture. On the surface, the plot's resolution does indeed function to erase the threatening possibility of lesbianism from the text. Because Annie is revealed as the perpetrator, motivated by an antifeminist rage at the death of her husband, the specter of lesbian desire that originally surfaces with her threats is effectively erased from the college environment. There is no "semi-demented spinster" driven mad with repressed lesbian desire, after all; the women of Shrewsbury who had eyed each other with excited suspicion are reassured that none of their own had been harboring such dangerous homoerotic impulses. Sayers rather disingenuously suggests in the final pages, "They were all normal again. They had never been anything else" (493).

As further evidence that the potential for sexual deviance is obliterated and the dominant order restored, the novel's conclusion finds Harriet accepting Peter's marriage proposal. Despite her feminist doubts about the institution of marriage, despite her confusion about her sexuality, Harriet Vane will become Mrs. Peter Wimsey: could a more overt narrative capitulation to the heterosexist patriarchy be possible? By hastening to affirm that Harriet and the good women of Shrewsbury are most assuredly heterosexual, and by silencing lesbian desire—the unacknowledged, unspoken "secret" driving the mystery narrative—must not Sayers be seen to endorse the marginalization of homosexuality and to re-affirm institutional heterosexuality?

And yet, on the one hand, the resolution of *Gaudy Night* reveals how Sayers's text is circumscribed within the dominant social conventions that its plot ultimately imposes, which can undoubtedly be attributed to a certain conservatism both within the author and the popular audience for which she was writing; on the other hand, however, the queer possibilities that Sayers keeps in play throughout the bulk of the novel function precisely to destabilize that hetero/homo binary. The disembodied, free-floating desire that is unleashed throughout the mystery

resists the fixity of a determinate subject or object. By seducing both the women of Shrewsbury and the reader with the possibility that lesbianism is the spectral "secret" behind the aggression of the poison pen, and that the culprit could be or "get" anyone, Sayers effectively uses the premise of that aggression to challenge, rather than to uphold, what Hart calls the discursive "violence" of heterosexist dualisms.

Furthermore, many contemporary readers would find it completely feasible to read a queer subtext into the heterosexual romance/marriage plot involving Harriet and Peter as well. Harriet is a rather masculinized figure; Sayers describes her in various places as a tall, somewhat rough, gawky, short-haired, strong-featured woman.<sup>5</sup> Saint-George exclaims to her when she refuses to respond sympathetically to his attempts to charm her, "You are the most unwomanly woman I ever met" (223). Correspondingly, Peter is a notably feminized figure. Harriet notices that Saint-George shares his Uncle Peter's face, "ominously weak about the curved lips"; his hair, "the pale yellow of ripe barley"; his "light, drawling voice"; and his "beautiful, sensitive hands" (181). Other characters remark Peter's lack of masculinity as well. As the monocled, impeccably groomed detective cuts a dandyish figure playing the piano and singing an Elizabethan love song in an antique shop, another man loudly goads, "Who is this effeminate bounder?" (423). Even Annie accuses him of lacking sufficient virility to entice the women of Shrewsbury to regard him as a sexual object: "It's men like you that make women like this. You don't know how to do anything but talk" (488).

There is a curious lack of sexual chemistry, moreover, between Harriet and Peter. His proposals to her are noticeably lacking with respect to passion or romance, as are her responses to them. And in one of the most interesting and bizarre scenes of the novel, the pair enacts a stylized, mock sadomasochistic ritual that culminates in the purchase of a studded leather dog collar for Harriet. The highly aestheticized "degree of artifice" in the scene is characteristic of camp, according to Susan Sontag's influential analysis of the subject (275). The premise for the scene is a self-defense lesson intended to protect Harriet from an attack by the poison pen. The tongue-in-cheek, aestheticized nature of the ritual is evinced by Peter's observation that Harriet would make a good strangling victim: "'You have a nice throat for it,' pursued his lordship, thoughtfully. 'It has a kind of arum-lily quality that is in itself a temptation to

violence. I do not want to be run in by the local bobby for assault; but if you will kindly step aside with me into this convenient field, it will give me great pleasure to strangle you scientifically in several positions" (413). They spend the next few minutes engaged in various modes of strangulation attack-and-response movements, after which Harriet compliments him: "No gentleman could throttle a lady more impersonally." Peter responds, "Thank you for the testimonial. Cigarette?" (414). As they indulge in a mockingly post-coital smoke, it is clear to the reader that Sayers is playfully appropriating the conventions of a sadomasochistic sex ritual to evoke a scene that is decidedly unerotic or asexual.

In contrast to the parodic quality of this scene, "in actual S/M rituals [...] playfulness and parody seem to be entirely lacking, perhaps because [...] parody is an erotic turn-off," as Tania Modleski argues (154). Neither Harriet nor Peter possesses the true fetishist's "I know, but all the same," suspension of disbelief that would render the scene erotically stimulating; the artifice is obvious to both them and the reader. I suggest, then, that the erotic artifice of this scene is indicative of the entire romance plot involving the two. Sue-Ellen Case argues that gay and lesbian subcultures have used camp as a mode of "liberation from the rule of naturalism or realism," as a way of breaking down the rules between what's real and what's not. Camp, she explains, "eradicates the ruling power of heterosexist realist modes" (298). In this campy sadomasochism scene, the pretense of violence once again serves as a narrative pretense for destabilizing hegemonic constructions of sexuality. Sayers may perhaps be bowing to heteronormative conventionality by marrying off her two protagonists, but she does so with a wink that suggests there's something queer about those two.

Dorothy Sayers was no stranger to erotic attractions between women, and the gender and sexual ambiguity that overshadowed her own life undoubtedly contributed to her interest in exploring these issues in *Gaudy Night*. She was well aware, for instance, of the propensity for homoerotic attractions to develop in single-sex institutional environments. Barbara Reynolds's biography of Sayers reveals its subject to have been quite candid about the high school crush she shared with other classmates on a certain instructor, Miss White. Reynolds calls the attraction "a clear case of *schwärmerei* ["romantic zeal"]" (30). Nancy M. Tischler, too, acknowledges that in the "'woman-ridden' existence.[...]

Sayers shared for the first twenty-five years of her life, she had seen many levels of woman-love," ranging from "deep friendship" to those "fragile outcropp[ing] of the romantic drive" which are fraught with "more dangers" (62-63). Those "dangers," perhaps, served as the inspiration behind *Gaudy Night's* linkage of same-sex eroticism and aggression.

As most of the biographical literature on Sayers is quite reverential in tone and reluctant to probe immodestly into issues of her sexuality, no conclusive evidence indicates that Sayers ever acted upon any of her attractions to other women, either during her schoolgirl years or during her later membership in the all-female Mutual Admiration Society she founded at Oxford in 1912. Certainly, she never identified herself as a lesbian. What does clearly emerge from scrutiny of Sayers's early life is the portrait of a young girl markedly confused about her gender and sexual identity. As a young teen, she indulged both in the predictable adolescent crushes on neighboring young men and male matinee idols, and in the male-identified fantasy of being one of *The Three Musketeers*, "hopelessly enamoured of the fair duchesse de Chevreuse," a role assumed by her cousin Ivy Shrimpton, eight years her senior. Sayers apparently fostered this fantasy in "flowery love letters" to Ivy, to whom she also sent romantic French poems (Reynolds 25). A fascinating photograph in Reynolds's book captures a teenage Sayers in her masculine guise, dressed to the hilt as Athos, the gallant lover from Alexandre Dumas's novel (20).

This image of Sayers strikingly foreshadows the later androgynous persona she was to adopt and the ways her future biographer was to describe her. Reynolds's description of the novelist when she motorcycled through the English countryside in 1926 to visit her parents in the village where her father was the local Anglican priest conjures up irreverent subtitles that might be imagined by a modern reader, particularly one familiar with the lesbian themes in the author's work: "Dorothy Sayers, Motorcycle Mama," or perhaps, "Biker Butch." Reynolds writes:

Dorothy dressed in motorcoat, leggings and boots. She wore gauntlets and goggles and her cropped hair was hidden beneath a leather helmet. Her appearance was startlingly unfeminine. What her parents thought of it we can only guess but someone who saw her arrive attired in such fashion at her father's house outside Oxford described her in very unflattering terms.

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There is a tough masculinity about her at this time. She must have been quite robust to handle the heavy motor-cycle of the period and she obviously enjoyed the aggressive noise of the engine and the defiant danger of speed. (202-03)

Carolyn Heilbrun points out that by the 1930s, about the time Sayers was approaching middle age and writing *Gaudy Night*, the author found herself more free than ever "to disdain those efforts of dress, cosmetics, and hairdressing that had always caused her undue effort and dissatisfaction" (557). The stout, short-haired Sayers partook of what was considered at the time to be the "unbecoming habit" of wearing trousers (558). Of Sayers's weight, Heilbrun speculates that it was a physical manifestation of a psychic denunciation of a burdensome femininity: "But can it be doubted that for a woman to grow fat in middle age is to disassociate her personhood from her feminine appeal?" (558).

Despite Sayers's marriage in 1926 to a journalist who, according to Reynolds, "bitterly resented" (243) her success—a marriage which endured, apparently unhappily, until his death in 1950—it is evident that her sexual orientation nonetheless has persisted to be the object of speculation. As Heilbrun points out, while authorized biographer James Brabazon denies that the author's "intense" friendships with other women were sexual, he "does not deal with Sayers' great defensiveness on this subject" (560). Heilbrun thus succeeds both in illustrating that Sayers's sexual orientation was subject to question during her lifetime and in slyly implying that perhaps the lady protested a bit too much. The question of whether or not Sayers ever engaged in homosexual activity is likely to remain unanswerable, and indeed is irrelevant to the queer sensibility of her narrative. What the autobiographical information on Sayers does serve to illuminate is an author self-consciously aware of the violence of gender and sexual marginalization, one whose ingenious use of aggression to indulge in otherwise prohibited homoerotic fantasies serves to challenge that marginalization.

To find such a challenge within *Gaudy Night*, a text that for decades was often dismissed as a weak link in a popular mystery series, is all the more striking considering that both Sayers and the detective fiction genre are commonly associated with social conservatism. In the late 1930s, Sayers began to devote her writing exclusively to Christian scholarship and religious drama. Since the most progressive modern literature is

frequently characterized by iconoclastic thematizations of the death of God and the spiritual wasteland of modern industrial society, it is perhaps little wonder, given Sayers's well-known association with ecclesiastical dogma, that few have looked for a subversive subtext in her work. Likewise, the predominant critical view of detective fiction holds that it is a genre characterized by a conservative belief in good and evil, a genre which appeals to the conservative desire to see evil punished as justice and order are restored. While these commonly held views about the conservatism of both Sayers and detective fiction are not without merit, in light of the preceding analysis of *Gaudy Night*, they are nonetheless deceptively reductive. As feminist critic Rita Felski convincingly argues, "a strategy of representation that may seem old-fashioned from the perspective of the dominant group may acquire quite different meanings and functions when used by a marginal group to challenge previous exclusions" ("Modernism" 203). Clearly, *Gaudy Night* suggests meanings considerably more nuanced and subversive than those of an old-fashioned mystery yarn. In its poststructuralist play with signifying "clues," in its queer pleasure in deconstructing gender and sexual binaries, in its aggressive indictment of the patriarchal norms embodied in the dangerous, antifeminist Annie—in all of these, *Gaudy Night* reveals itself to be very much ahead of its time. By anticipating postmodern theoretical critiques of the violence of systemic gender and sexual domination, and by doing so in a genre whose very popularity and accessibility ensured a wide audience, Sayers strategically constructs a complex web of danger and homoerotic desire that invites radical political and artistic interpretation.

## Notes

1. For more on this argument, see Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, where she convincingly argues that "generalized claims for the subversive nature of experimental forms need to be replaced by more contextually specific analyses of the relations between particular discourse and different axes of power" (27). Even the writings of canonical women writers such as Virginia Woolf or Gertrude Stein reveal more about the bohemian or aristocratic subcultures of Bloomsbury or the Left Bank than about the lives of many other modern women, and they have been valorized to the exclusion of more popular forms of representation (27-28).

2. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar analyze how social changes heightened anxiety about women's sexuality, suggesting that "erotic release was frequently associated with the unprecedented freedoms women were achieving" (299).
3. For further historical examples of how modern sexologists have associated lesbians with violent women, see Faderman 55-56.
4. A 1922 publication put out by the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor states that "[a] young man, usually ascertainable to be unusually fine in other characteristics, is probably 'queer' in sex tendency."
5. Recalling Mary Stokes's attention, Sayers writes, "It had seemed strange that she should take a fancy to Harriet Vane, rough and gawky and anything but generally popular" (3); Harriet has "a strong nose, a little too broad for beauty"; she is too tall for the mirror in the dormitory room she is lodged in at Shrewsbury (8).

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