‘The Dogma is the Drama’: Participation and Sacramentality in the Plays of Dorothy L. Sayers

Margaret Wiedemann Hunt, MA (Oxon.)

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
September, 2016



Fig. 1. Dorothy L. Sayers at the Detection Club.

Abstract

Dorothy L. Sayers's first festival play, *The Zeal of Thy House* (1937), was written at a time when it was widely believed among Christian drama practitioners that drama itself has a sacramental significance. This conviction took on a new urgency for Sayers as theologians and church people sought ways of establishing Christianity as a basis on which to rebuild society after the Second World War. Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), a study in theological aesthetics intended as a contribution to public debate about post-war reconstruction, outlined a Trinitarian and sacramental model for human work considered as a creative activity. Sayers wrote three more festival plays between 1939 and 1951, and this study examines the four plays in the light of her sacramental emphasis. It locates Sayers's dramatic practice in the context of those Roman and Anglo-Catholic practitioners of the arts who embraced the neo-Thomism of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain, and examines the influence of William Temple and his belief in the sacramentality of the whole material creation. The study argues that while the festival plays have the background of timeless sacramentality noted by a number of commentators, Sayers takes sacramentalism further in all four plays with the onstage enactment of a timebound sacramental event in which the protagonist, estranged from God by an imbalance in the dynamic Trinitarian flow within his creative self, experiences *anagnorisis*, repentance and the hope of restoration to the community of believers. This sacramental enactment becomes a model for the audience's participative reception of the play itself, and the study uses insights from contemporary theorists of medieval drama to elucidate the nature of the dramatic experience in which theatre and sacrament become reciprocally paradigmatic. The belief that art and theology can critique each other was central to Sayers's approach to dramatising the gospels in her wartime BBC radio life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, and a chapter on this play examines its participatory hermeneutics as an extension of the sacramentality of the stage plays. A final section locates Sayers's concept of the 'passionate intellect' in relation to the mid-century theological tension between faith and reason. Few commentators have given Sayers's four plays equal weight, and many have omitted her last play. This study aims to unite literary and theological methodologies in arguing that Sayers's festival plays demonstrate an increasingly participative sacramentality that culminates in the onstage baptism of the final play, written for the Festival of Britain, *The Emperor Constantine*.

Acknowledgments

I am very much indebted to the staff of several archives for their help and support in locating and making available material for this research, notably Marjorie Lamp Mead and Laura Schmidt at the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Illinois. The staff at Lambeth Palace Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum theatre collections have been unfailingly efficient, as have Seona Ford, Alison Hall and the late Christopher Dean in photocopying items from the Dorothy L. Sayers Society Archive. I am grateful to the Acting Dean and staff of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, for a lecture visit in March 2013 that enabled me to discuss Sayers with some vigorous thinkers, in particular Fredericka Berger, whose friendship and scholarship over thirty years has been a great inspiration. In the UK, Kenneth Pickering has been generous with ideas and encouragement. Two outstanding women, both now dead, gave me an interest in Sayers's plays: in 1966 Pamela Keily cast me as the Evangelist in her production of a play from *The Man Born to be King*, and in 1986 Barbara Reynolds expounded the theology of *The Just Vengeance* to a group from Radius, The Religious Drama Society of Great Britain, who went on to put theology into action with a rehearsed reading of extracts. The late Rex Walford, who was active in both Radius and the Sayers Society, led the way for a new appreciation of Sayers in 2004 with a production of the whole of *The Man Born to be King* in St Mark's, Newnham. Finally I should like to express heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Alison Milbank, for her erudition and for her skill in opening up avenues of study that were new to me.

Contents

Frontispiece

Abstract **i**

Acknowledgments **ii**

Contents **iii**

List of illustrations **vi**

Chapter One: Introduction **1**

Context and Background Information **1**

Literature Review **3**

Drama and Dogma:

The Christian Hermeneutics of Dramatic Reading **9**

Drama and Sacrament **14**

The Sacramentality of Presence **21**

Theology and Creativity **25**

Theoretical Paradigm and Research Philosophy **30**

Dorothy L. Sayers: A Brief Life **34**

Chapter Two: Beginnings: Dramas of the Soul's Choice **37**

Forms of Drama **37**

Pageants **39**

Mysteries **43**

Liturgical Participation **44**

Charles Williams **47**

Seed of Adam **47**

Williams's Theology of Performance **50**

Detection: Realism and Moral Choice **52**

Moral Responsibility and Individual Choice **54**

Wimsey as an Agent of Justice **56**

The Murderer as God in *The Documents in the Case* **58**

Sayers's Aesthetics **60**

'Right in art is right in practice': Art as Critique **60**

Literary Influence **65**

Conclusion **68**

Chapter Three: Sayers's Lay Theology, *The Zeal of Thy House* and *The Mind of the Maker* **70**

Sayers as Lay Theologian **70**

Malvern 1941: Christ, the Artist and the Law **71**

Locating Sayers in a Tradition of Theology and the Arts **75**

Sayers and Originality **78**

The Zeal of Thy House **80**

The Genesis of *The Zeal of Thy House* **80**

Scenes I – III: The Integrity of the Artist **84**

Scene IV: The Eldest Sin of All **90**

Sayers's Style in *The Zeal of Thy House* **93**

***The Mind of the Maker*: Idea, Energy, Power** **98**

The Impetus of Fr Kelly's Letters **98**

The Limits of Analogy **101**

Conclusion **104**

Chapter Four: *The Mind of the Maker* and *The Devil to Pay* **107**

***The Mind of the Maker*: 'Maker of Ill Things'?** **107**

The Devil to Pay **114**

Scene I: Wittenberg **116**

Scene II: Rome **121**

Scene III: Innsbruck **123**

Scene IV: The Court of Heaven **124**

Themes in *The Devil to Pay* **128**

Critiques of *The Devil to Pay* and its Theology **131**

Conclusion **134**

Chapter Five: Partners in Rescue: *The Just Vengeance* **138**

The Idea **138**

***The Just Vengeance* and Censorship** **144**

The Just Vengeance **146**

The Pageant **148**

The Mystery Play **153**

The Theology of *The Just Vengeance* **169**

***The Just Vengeance* in Performance** **173**
Conclusion **178**

Chapter Six: *The Emperor Constantine*:
Creed, Sacrament and Empire **179**
Introduction **179**
Creed **183**
Starting Points **183**
The Council **188**
Individual and Community **194**
Sacrament **195**
Empire and Conversion **202**
Conclusion **206**

Chapter Seven: *The Man Born to be King* **208**
Introduction **208**
The Genesis of *The Man Born to be King* **215**
The Theological Power of Realism: *He That Should Come* **218**
Realism and Hermeneutics:
Reading *The Man Born to be King* Dynamically **221**
The Dramatic Conflict between Jesus and Judas **224**
The Journey to Calvary: Plays Eight to Eleven **230**
Sayers's Passion Play **233**
An End and a Beginning: Play Twelve **236**
Reception **239**

Chapter Eight: "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists"? **242**
Pattern **243**
Theological Aesthetics **245**
God's Narrative **247**
Freedom of the Creature **248**
Playwrights are not Evangelists **251**

Bibliography **255**

List of Illustrations

Fig. 1. Dorothy L. Sayers at the Detection Club. Frontispiece

In *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Three: 1944-1950: A Noble Daring*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, 294, courtesy of Archdeacon Stroud. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.

Fig. 2. The Finale group at the York pageant, 1909, representing cities of York worldwide. 38

In Anthony Parker, *Pageants, their Presentation and Production*, Plate 29 following page 80, courtesy of the City Librarian, York. London: The Bodley Head, 1954.

Fig. 3. The York cycle of Mystery Plays, 1954: the release of Barabbas. 38

In E. Martin Browne with Henzie Browne, *Two in One*, Fig. 29, 196, photo: Will Acton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

Fig. 4. The Chapter examines the plans of the rival architects. 81

In Kenneth Pickering, *Drama in the Cathedral*, fig. 19, 228. Malvern: J. Garnet Miller, 1986, revised 2001.

Fig. 5. William of Sens and Archangels in *The Zeal of Thy House*. 81

In *Canterbury Cathedral Chronicle*, no. 27, July 1937, centre pages. Photo: Fisk-Moore, Canterbury.

Fig. 6. *The Devil to Pay*: Frank Napier as Mephistopheles and Harcourt Williams as Faustus, with Young Faustus and Helen in the mirror. 119

In Kenneth Pickering, *Drama in the Cathedral*, fig. 21, 247. Malvern: J. Garnet Miller, 1986, revised 2001.

Fig. 7. Sketch of the set of *The Devil to Pay*. 119

In Dorothy L. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 120. London: Victor Gollancz, 1948.

Fig. 8. Lichfield Festival poster designed by John Piper. 137

In *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Three: 1944-1950: A Noble Daring*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, facing 202. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.

Fig. 9. A performance of *The Just Vengeance* in Lichfield Cathedral. **142**

In Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, 96, courtesy of Norah Lambourne. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989.

Fig. 10. Jesus's ministry in *The Just Vengeance*. **161**

In Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, 91, courtesy of Norah Lambourne. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989.

Fig. 11. *The Just Vengeance*: Norah Lambourne's set design. **161**

In Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, 93, courtesy of Norah Lambourne. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989.

Fig. 12. Properties made by Sayers for *The Emperor Constantine*. **187**

In *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Four: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, plates 3, 4 and 5, following page 12. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.

Fig. 13. *The Emperor Constantine*: The Council of Nicaea. **190**

In *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Four: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, 34, courtesy of Norah Lambourne. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.

Fig. 14. *The Emperor Constantine*:

Norah Lambourne's design for the Council. **190**

In *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Four: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life*, ed. Barbara Reynolds, plate 4, following page 12, courtesy of Norah Lambourne. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.

Fig. 15. Objection to *The Man Born to be King*. **209**

In Kenneth M. Wolfe, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956*, fig. 19, opposite page 233, courtesy of the BBC. London: SCM Press, 1984.

‘The Dogma is the Drama’: Participation and Sacramentality in the Plays of Dorothy L. Sayers

Chapter One
Introduction

Context and Background Information

Dorothy L. Sayers was a household name in the mid-twentieth century. Widely read as a detective novelist, she consolidated her literary fame by moving into radio broadcasting, not only as the author of radio plays but also as a practitioner of the radio talk, dispensing argumentative and morale-boosting advice during the war years. She wrote four full-length plays for festivals and after the war she translated Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for Penguin Books, again attracting a wide readership.

Sayers’s four writing careers are distinct, though I shall show that they are closely related. She published twelve detective novels and three volumes of short stories between 1921 and 1939; between 1937 and 1951 she was commissioned to write four festival plays on religious themes, three of them produced in cathedrals and one in a cinema auditorium, and during this time she also wrote the twelve-part radio life of Christ *The Man Born to be King*;[1] thirdly, in 1949 and 1955 she published her translations of Dante’s *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* and had completed most of the *Paradiso* at her death in 1957.[2] In addition to these three categories of literary work she had a significant career as a lay Christian apologist: from the mid-thirties onwards she was in demand as a lecturer and broadcaster and most of her talks have been published, notably in *Unpopular Opinions* (1946), the posthumous *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (1963) and two volumes of lectures on Dante.[3]

---

[1] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Zeal of Thy House* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937); *The Devil to Pay* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1939); *The Just Vengeance* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946); *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1952); *The Man Born to be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943).

[2] Dorothy L. Sayers, trans., *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949); *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955); completed by Barbara Reynolds, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962).

[3] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946); *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963); *Introductory Papers on Dante* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1954)); *Further Papers on Dante*, (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1957)).

Early in the war she felt the need to add her voice to the writers including William Temple, T.S. Eliot and George Bell who were addressing the question of whether a post-war world might be based on Christian principles, and the result was her book on theological aesthetics, *The Mind of the Maker* (1941).[4]

Sayers was a prolific letter-writer who took her correspondents' views seriously and would reply at length to people she had never met; among the friends and acquaintances with whom she discussed literary and theological issues are her Oxford contemporaries, the designers, actors and directors she met in the world of the theatre, the staff at the BBC, fellow writers, theologians and clergy of different denominations, her son John and her friend the Dante scholar Dr Barbara Reynolds. In her book about Sayers and Dante, *The Passionate Intellect*, Reynolds points out that Sayers used letter-writing and conversation to develop her ideas,[5] and C.S. Lewis suggested to Sayers, perhaps with a touch of kindly malice, that future generations would hail her as 'one of the great letter writers' when her other work was forgotten.[6] Reynolds, who completed Sayers's Dante translation, edited a comprehensive selection of her letters in four volumes.[7] It may be that the four writing careers identified above should be expanded to include that of literary letter-writer.

This dissertation will make full use of all these materials in order to demonstrate the holistic nature of her project. Sayers's letters, detective fiction, apologetics and above all her theological aesthetics in *The Mind of the Maker* will be used to analyse and explicate the four festival plays on religious subjects which are her least-known

---

[4] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941). The following year Sayers initiated an unsuccessful project to create a book covering doctrines agreed by the main Christian denominations, the "Oecumenical Penguin," and several Memoranda for the project can be read in the Bell archive of Lambeth Palace Library (1942, London, LPL, MS Bell/208, particularly 256-64). The project has been covered in detail by Giles Watson in "Catholicism in Anglican Culture and Theology: Responses to Crisis in England (1937-1949)," (Australian National University PhD thesis, 1998), 221-70, and also see Watson's article "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Oecumenical Penguin," *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 14 (1997): 17-32.

[5] Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989), 61.

[6] C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume II*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 682.

[7] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1899 – 1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist*, ed. Barbara Reynolds (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995); *Volume Two: 1937 -1943: From Novelist to Playwright* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997); *Volume Three: 1944 -1950: A Noble Daring* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998); *Volume Four: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000).

and least discussed work, and this analysis will form the basis of a concluding discussion of Sayers's radio life of Christ sequence *The Man Born to be King*.

Literature Review

Following Sayers's death in 1957 there was a period of little scholarly interest. Two events in the seventies prompted a rush into print: the publication of Janet Hitchman's *Such a Strange Lady* in 1975,[8] which publicly revealed for the first time the fact that Sayers had an illegitimate son; and a BBC television series of Lord Peter Wimsey mysteries, which reached America in the late seventies and fuelled interest in Sayers both as a writer and as a person. Although Sayers had requested that no biography should be written until fifty years after her death, around 1980 several literary-biographical studies were published without access to her papers. Typically they combined valuable insight into Sayers's work with misconceptions about her life. The most significant of these is Ralph E. Hone's *Dorothy L Sayers: A Literary Biography* (1979).[9] Although Hone is at pains to correct the negative aspects of Hitchman's picture, like Hitchman he makes some mistaken biographical assumptions. Hone's chapter on Sayers's drama focuses on her first Canterbury Festival play *The Zeal of Thy House* and emphasizes its continuity with the detective stories, providing an important direction for future research, though there has been no book-length examination of this continuity. The theology of individual detective stories receives recognition in a number of subsequent studies, notably Barbara Reynolds's analysis of *The Nine Tailors* in her 1993 biography,[10] and H.R.F. Keating's brief but important acknowledgment of the theological focus of the detective novel *The Documents in the Case*.[11] This study will follow these signposts and will suggest that in the detective novels Sayers was laying the foundations not only for the dramatisation of good and evil in the plays but also for the theological aesthetics of *The Mind of the Maker* and the essay "Towards a Christian Aesthetic".[12]

---

[8] Janet Hitchman, *Such a Strange Lady* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

[9] Ralph E. Hone, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979).

[10] Barbara Reynolds, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993), 239-41.

[11] H.R.F. Keating, "Dorothy L.'s Mickey Finn," in *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*, ed. Alzina Stone Dale (New York: Walker, 1993), 137.

[12] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic," in *Unpopular Opinions*, 29–43.

An authorised biography, published in 1981, was commissioned from James Brabazon, who knew Sayers at the end of her life through her work at St Anne's Soho.[13] Brabazon's thoroughly researched book is still the starting point for Sayers studies, covering every aspect of her life, and also incorporating confident literary judgments. Brabazon argues that the detective stories are Sayers's enduring legacy: 'How fortunate we are that she was not able to stick exclusively to her poetry, her historical subjects, all the literary things she loved! We might never have known who she was.'[14] This conclusion is challenged in *Dorothy L Sayers: Her Life and Soul* (1993) by Sayers's friend and collaborator on the Dante translation, Barbara Reynolds. With scholarly scrupulosity Reynolds avoids going over material Brabazon has covered in detail, focusing rather on Sayers's inner life, and also avoiding the ground she herself had already covered in *The Passionate Intellect*. Reynolds's literary and spiritual biography, therefore, although it is essential reading and has received many superlatives, is conceived as a project to provide a fuller picture rather than to supersede others' work. Broadly speaking, my own study is an attempt to develop Reynolds's case that Sayers's religious writing has been underrated. This will involve giving full weight to both the theological and literary aspects of her work.

Among literary studies, Catherine Kenney's *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L Sayers*[15] focuses, as the title suggests, on the detective novels, and makes a pertinent connection between Sayers's literary theory and that of Flannery O'Connor in *Mystery and Manners*.[16] O'Connor was familiar with the aesthetic theories of Jacques Maritain, whose influence on Sayers will be discussed in this study. Reynolds's *The Passionate Intellect* is a major critical work, focusing not only on Sayers's translation of Dante but on her debt to Dante in other writing, notably the play *The Just Vengeance*. The study is remarkable for the light it sheds on Sayers's working methods and carries the authority of someone who was a friend and colleague. Crystal Downing's *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (2004)[17] argues that Sayers uses pre-modern strategies to anticipate some of

[13] James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1988 (1981)).
[14] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 277.
[15] Catherine Kenney, *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1981).
[16] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970 (1961)).
[17] Crystal Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

the approaches of postmodernism, examining what a twenty-first century readership brings to the works and emphasizing their polysemy. While acknowledging that Downing's work yields many significant insights, I shall argue that Sayers's acceptance of polysemy is also shared with modernist writers.

The location of Sayers's work within the mainstream of early twentieth century theological writing is supported by Michael Hampel's important thesis on *The Mind of the Maker*, "Dorothy L. Sayers: Creative Mind and The Holy Trinity",[18] which examines Sayers's theological aesthetic in the light of the theology of Collingwood, Barth, Rahner and Macquarrie, and compares Sayers's use of the Trinitarian analogy with comparable themes in the work of Eliot, Lewis and Williams. Sayers's apologetics is the subject of Laura K. Simmons's doctoral dissertation "Theology made interesting: Dorothy L. Sayers as a lay theologian".[19] Like several other Sayers scholars, Simmons uses 'incarnation' as a metaphorical term for Sayers's realisation of ideas in narrative or dramatic form, and although Sayers herself sometimes used the concept of incarnation in this sense, I shall avoid doing so on the grounds that in the context of religious writing the term is potentially misleading.

There are several useful book-length studies of Sayers's theology. Simmons's *Creed Without Chaos* (2005)[20] is an impressively researched survey ranging across the whole of Sayers's work, identifying the theological concepts Sayers uses and placing them in their social and ecclesiological context. Janice Brown's *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (1998)[21] is an examination of the theme in all Sayers's work and an invaluable springboard for further analysis. John Thurmer's monographs *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (1996)[22] and *A Detection of the Trinity* (2008)[23] examine Sayers's theology particularly in relation to Augustine and Aquinas and provide some clear-sighted comments on the limitations of theological concepts as drama.

---

[18] Michael Hampel, "Dorothy L. Sayers: Creative Mind and The Holy Trinity" (MA dissertation, University of Durham, 2002).
[19] Laura K. Simmons, "Theology Made Interesting: Dorothy L. Sayers as a Lay Theologian" (PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999).
[20] Laura K. Simmons, *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005).
[21] Janice Brown, *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998).
[22] John Thurmer, *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996).
[23] John Thurmer, *A Detection of the Trinity* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008).

Some specialist books and papers on Sayers have contributed valuable ideas and material to this study. Suzanne Bray's edition of Sayers's wartime talks, *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II* (2008)[24] explores the wartime theological context, and Bray's chapter on Sayers and Charles Williams in a recent collection has further important insights.[25] Bethany Wood's dissertation "Incorporation of the Incarnation: Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to be King* and the Wartime BBC"[26] examines the series' contribution to wartime national identity, and David Coomes's biography based on the letters evaluates the impact of *The Man Born to be King* more generally.[27] Peter Webster's article on Archbishop Temple's offer to Sayers of a Lambeth degree is a convincing exploration of her faith, theology and attitude towards the Church;[28] Christine M. Fletcher's study of Sayers's theology of work uses that theology to illuminate her writing in all genres.[29] There are hundreds of collections of articles published by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society under the umbrella of "Sidelights" and "Proceedings", many of them containing articles by the authors mentioned above, and the series is an essential resource.[30]

Sayers has always had her detractors, as one would expect of someone with a colourful personality and strong views. Kathleen Nott's exposé of mid-century religious apologists including Sayers, Lewis and Eliot, *The Emperor's Clothes*, was published during Sayers's lifetime in 1953.[31] Nott focuses on the conviction of these writers that theological reasoning should proceed from assumptions different from

---

[24] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II*, ed. Suzanne Bray (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008).

[25] Suzanne Bray, "Dorothy L. Sayers: Disciple and Interpreter of Charles Williams," in *Charles Williams and His Contemporaries*, ed. Suzanne Bray and Richard Sturch (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 93-116.

[26] Bethany Wood, "Incorporation of the Incarnation: Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to be King* and the Wartime BBC" (MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2008).

[27] David Coomes, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life* (Oxford: Lion Books, 1992).

[28] Peter Webster, "Archbishop Temple's offer of a Lambeth degree to Dorothy L. Sayers," in *From the Reformation to the Permissive Society*, ed. Melanie Barber and Stephen Taylor with Gabriel Sewell (London: Church of England Record Society, 2010), 565-82.

[29] Christine M. Fletcher, *The Artist and the Trinity: Dorothy L. Sayers' Theology of Work* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013).

[30] Frances Clemson's PhD thesis "The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers' Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the 'continual showing forth of God's act in history'" (University of Exeter, 2012) was not available at the time of writing; the abstract suggests that it does not cover all the plays.

[31] Kathleen Nott, *The Emperor's Clothes* (London: Heinemann, 1953).

the empirical data that are the basis of scientific investigation, and exposes what she considers to be the resulting absurdities in their work. It will be a task of this study to examine the frame of reference in Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker*, and in particular her use of the Trinity as a paradigm for creative work which Nott challenges.[32] More nuanced contemporary criticism came from C.S. Lewis, who admired *The Man Born to be King* but argued that in *Mind* Sayers failed to maintain an insistence on analogy rather than continuity as the link between divine and human creation.[33] This will be discussed below.

Three studies of twentieth century religious drama devote significant space to Sayers's work, and each one takes the view that her style is derivative. I hope to challenge this through close reading of selected passages, though a simpler test might be to open one of Sayers's plays at random and ask whether the style could seriously be mistaken for that of T.S. Eliot or Charles Williams, her predecessors as Canterbury playwrights. Gerald Weales's 1961 survey of religious drama in the first half of the twentieth century includes a chapter entitled "Charles Williams and Dorothy Sayers" in which he compares the two very much to Sayers's disadvantage. I shall call this into question, while recognising that Weales's 1961 assumptions give some insight into why Sayers's drama has attracted relatively little critical attention compared with her novels.[34] Kenneth Pickering's magisterial work on the Canterbury Festival plays, *Drama in the Cathedral* (1986),[35] includes informative chapters on the genesis and staging of both *Zeal* and *The Devil to Pay*. Like Weales, Pickering regards a good deal of Sayers's verse as derivative.

The third study of twentieth century religious drama that includes a significant and again to some extent dismissive section on Sayers is William V. Spanos's study of modern British verse drama subtitled "The Poetics of Sacramental Time".[36] Like Weales and Pickering, Spanos dismisses Sayers's 'lesser poetic gifts' compared with her predecessors at Canterbury, but acknowledges that the multivocal qualities of

---

[32] Nott, *Emperor's Clothes*, 285-9.
[33] C.S. Lewis, "The Mind of the Maker," review of *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *Theology* XLIII, no. 256, October 1941, 248-9.
[34] Gerald Weales, *Religion in Modern English Drama* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961).
[35] Kenneth Pickering, *Drama in the Cathedral* (Malvern: J. Garnet Miller, 1986, revised 2001).
[36] William V. Spanos, *The Christian Tradition in Modern Verse Drama: The Poetics of Sacramental Time* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1967).

The Zeal of Thy House rival the work of her contemporaries.[37] Spanos's work has a theological focus, ascribing to William Temple in *Nature, Man and God*[38] the currency of the mid-century view that the Incarnation, by being necessary *ab initio*, creates an aesthetic principle whereby the present contains the past.[39] His conception of sacramentalism is close to Eliot's 'intersection of the timeless with time'[40] and his argument focuses on what he sees as the Canterbury dramatists' characteristic strategy of collapsing time. The example he cites from Sayers's work is her partial conflation in *Zeal* of the rebuilding narrative with the story of Adam and Eve. While Spanos's book is an important contribution to the study of the genre, nevertheless his definition of sacramentality is restricted to the way in which the material world continuously mediates the ultimate; my discussion will also include the sacramentality of the play in performance and adopt a dynamic model of the nature of sacramentality. Mary A. Donahoe applies Spanos's theory to Sayers's major plays in persuasive detail,[41] though she excludes Sayers's final play *The Emperor Constantine* on the grounds that 'the development and execution of [Sayers's] aesthetic can be completely demonstrated in the earlier dramas.'[42] Against this I shall argue that *The Emperor Constantine* is Sayers's most clearly focused embodiment of sacramental theology. The sacramentality of Sayers's work is also discussed by Scott Burtis Bradley who argues that the concept of divine and human co-creation allows Evangelicals to engage with the uncertainties of postmodernism.[43]

Among the many interesting and significant studies of Sayers's work there is none that makes an extended analysis of all Sayers's major religious plays. The first purpose of this study is to fill that gap. Secondly, for Sayers as playwright the drama and theology were indivisible, as she asserted in the repeated claim that 'the dogma is the drama', yet there are few approaches to Sayers's work that give equal weight to both literary and theological analysis. To do both these areas full justice is beyond the scope of this thesis, but in attempting such a fusion I hope to sketch out a route

---

[37] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 131.
[38] William Temple, *Nature, Man and God* (London: Macmillan, 1953 (1934)).
[38] Temple, *Nature, Man*, 306.
[39] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 25.
[40] T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 189-90.
[41] Mary A. Donahoe, "The Sacramental Aesthetic in the Plays of Dorothy L. Sayers" (PhD thesis, University of Oregon, 1992).
[42] Donahoe, "Sacramental Aesthetic," 31.
[43] S. Burtis Bradley, "Sacramental Elements of Creativity in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers" (MA dissertation, Wheaton College, 2003).

that future researchers will pursue further. I have adopted a chronological approach to the plays because I believe that each one adds to or modifies the themes and insights of its predecessors. In particular, I shall trace the developing sacramental emphasis of the Festival plays.

Drama and Dogma:
The Christian Hermeneutics of Dramatic Reading

The interconnectedness of drama and theology in Sayers's work became a conscious theoretical preoccupation during the writing of *The Zeal of Thy House*. Among a large number of letters Sayers received following her move into explicitly religious subject matter was one from Fr Herbert Kelly asking if she was aware of the Trinitarian pattern inherent in the argument of *Zeal*. Their correspondence will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. In reply Sayers coined an expression which she was to use repeatedly, 'the dogma is the drama.'[44] It became the title of a 1938 article in *The Sunday Times* in which she wrote:

> It is the dogma that is the drama - not beautiful phrases, nor comforting sentiments, nor vague aspirations to loving-kindness and uplift, nor the promise of something nice after death - but the terrifying assertion that the same God Who made the world lived in the world and passed through the grave and gate of death. Show that to the heathen, and they may not believe it; but at least they may realise that here is something that a man might be glad to believe.[45]

This suggests two related but distinct starting points for an examination of the link between drama and theology in Sayers's work. First, the life of God incarnate is a narrative in history, and the mere fact of this narrative is 'terrifying'. Sayers frequently refers to this story as a drama, and the title of another *Sunday Times* article was "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged is the Official Creed of Christendom".[46] A comparable usage is found in the introduction to her translation of Dante's *Inferno* where Sayers refers to the poem as the 'drama of the soul's choice',[47] an expression that might equally be applied Sayers's plays. Sayers's use of word 'drama' suggests that a non-theatrical story may share certain 'dramatic'

---

[44] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 46.
[45] Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama," in *Strong Meat* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), 44.
[46] Published as *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938).
[47] Sayers, *Hell*, 11.

qualities characteristic of theatre: suspense, surprise, conflict, reversal and resolution, though we may also note that the word 'drama' in Greek simply means action. For Sayers, drama in this sense is inherent in the narrative of the Incarnation and this existential challenge heightens the effect of every event of Jesus's life.

Secondly, the task is to 'show that to the heathen', or in the more urbane twenty-first century formulation of Rowan Williams, 'the church is […] a missionary movement to realise persons in community by virtue of shared belonging to the risen Jesus.'[48] It is significant that Sayers uses the word 'show' rather than 'tell'. Sayers's project was to create drama whose qualities convey theology, and she believed not only that her theological subject matter was inherently dramatic, but also that drama itself was inherently theological. As we shall see, this conviction removed from Sayers any feeling of pressure to evangelize; she repeatedly said that conscious evangelization would lead to bad art and diminish the message. The quotation above suggests that Sayers's plays are written to engage audiences both intellectually and emotionally: the story is something its hearers 'might be glad to believe' and her use of the term 'dramatic' implies the need for the participative response of an audience. The identification of drama with dogma means that an audience's response will unite the hermeneutics of dramatic reading with participation in a sacramental encounter. This participation will be discussed in the next section.

The operation of non-theatrical 'drama' within the Christian narrative has been outlined by Rowan Williams:

> Christian interpretation is unavoidably engaged in 'dramatic' modes of reading: we are invited to identify ourselves in the story being contemplated, to reappropriate who we are now, and who we can or shall be, in terms of the story. *Its* movements, transactions, transformation, become *ours*; we take responsibility for this or that position within the narrative [...] our appropriation of the story [...] is an active working through of the story's movement in our own time.[49]

For Williams, realism is a key element within a narrative contract in mediating the kind of involvement in which the reader journeys with the characters in time, constantly revising and re-imagining meanings in the process: 'concern with the

[48] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 230.
[49] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 50.

literal, the diachronic, is a way of resisting the premature unities and harmonies of a non-literal reading (whether allegorical, existentialist, structuralist or deconstructionist), in which the time that matters is only the present of the reader faced with the "spatial" expanse of a text cut off from its own inner processes and the history of its production.'[50] In this caveat Williams identifies one of the limitations of an analysis based on collapsing time. If the text is read diachronically, on the other hand, as a movement in time, Williams calls this a literal reading because it is open to the generation of all other levels of meaning. He is talking about a text on the page, but the point he makes is intensified in the performance of drama.

The exploration of Christian hermeneutics in Sayers's drama will involve four concepts that unite literary and theological perspectives. The first is the realism identified by Williams and the way it involves the audience in the generation of theological meaning. After the first broadcast of the diachronic narrative in *The Man Born to be King* the realism of the dialogue proved controversial, prompting a complaint, as Sayers explained in a letter to Dr James Welch, the BBC Director of Religious Broadcasting, that the play '"seemed to bring God down to earth instead of raising man to God".'[51] What detractors such as these saw less clearly is the extent to which down-to-earth realism drives a theology in which dramatic action invites the audience to appropriate not only the story but also the experience, enacting transformation and conversion within the play and thus potentially 'raising man to God' in the words of her critic. 'Tear off the disguise of the Jacobean idiom [...], and there every man may see his own face. *We* played the parts in that tragedy [...] and perhaps are playing them today.'[52]

Appropriation or identification, often associated with realism, is a second important hermeneutical concept and is paradoxically bound up with the recognition of otherness. For Williams, drama 'unavoidably' involves an identification and 'appropriation' in which the audience joins the characters on their journey in time. Roger Grainger, a priest, professional actor and psychotherapist, has examined the audience's experience from a perspective that unites his own three professional approaches:

[50] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 47.
[51] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 340.
[52] Sayers, *Man Born*, 23.

> We don't go to the theatre with a conscious intention to expose and work through the imaginative reconstruction of some early trauma […] Instead, these things are drawn out of us by our tendency to identify with other women and men who, in one way or another, just simply remind us of something about ourselves.[53]

For Grainger, identification with a character involves the paradox of acknowledging that character as different from oneself. 'What is needed is to discover the otherness of the person who is not me and relate to that using our shared humanity to allow me to do so.'[54] Such distancing, the acknowledgment of a gap, is central self-realisation and with it the process of transformation, whether the distancing is conceptualised in the psychoanalytical language of Gestalt theory or Freudian transference, or in the language of theatre using the physical distance between actors and audience. We shall see that the settings of Sayers's plays physically minimised the gap between actors and audience while preserving the otherness inherent in the dramatic contract.

Symbolism is a means of regulating the pace of involvement, and this is the third concept that elucidates the way religious drama works for the audience: 'Symbolism allows us to come to terms on an intuitive level with facts whose literal meaning we cannot deal with – or cannot deal with yet.'[55] The process involves a recognition of the otherness inherent in metaphor and analogy: Grainger says that symbolism 'points towards infinity by demonstrating limitation (as in Shakespeare's "wooden O" [...]); it does not need to spell them out to us, being concerned not to regulate or control our imagination but to liberate it.'[56] This applies to both theatre and religious ritual. The process of internalising a narrative and allowing its transformational effect to happen is thus, on both a theological and psychoanalytical account, bound up with awareness of otherness expressed in symbolism that by its nature implies acceptance of open-endedness.

In using symbolism theologically Sayers was on familiar ground. Symbolism that initiates a hermeneutic process is central to the theological dimension in several of Sayers's detective novels and provides a link between the drama and fiction. As a

---

[53] Roger Grainger, *Theatre and Encounter: The Psychology of the Dramatic Relationship* (North America and International, Trafford Publishing, 2014), 43.
[54] Grainger, *Encounter*, 51.
[55] Grainger, *Encounter*, 57.
[56] Grainger, *Encounter*, 57.

medievalist by training Sayers was familiar with the fourfold method of interpretation[57] that stacks up layers of unspoken significance, and she realised at the outset of her playwriting career that through symbolism, metaphor and analogy the whole action of a play can embody theological ideas without having recourse to the prescriptive straitjacket of an intrusive narrative voice. In *Zeal*, for instance, the cathedral architect's disabling fall from the scaffolding happens as a direct result of the preoccupations that distract him and his workers from commitment to the good of the work. The physical fall is a symbolic, visual enactment of Original Sin, and thus the human drama is seen to enact a theological point with striking neatness and consistency. Spanos has identified simultaneous layers of symbolic meaning within this play but I suggest that what also engages the audience in a hermeneutic and affective response is William's transformation in time. The second Canterbury Festival play, *The Devil to Pay*, uses symbolism to dramatise the theology of evil as privation, first with a verbal image of the shadow which introduces the concept of evil's dependence on good for existence, and secondly with the onstage mirror through which Faustus steps when he gains twenty-four years' youthfulness, dividing the acting area to create a visually defined physical space within which Faustus's wrong choice takes its course. The world of the mirror is an illusory and distorting version of reality whose significance is not explicit in the text; the audience picks up the visual symbol which initiates a hermeneutic process and enables them to participate in the creation of meaning.

The fourth and final way in which dramatic and theological perspectives are united in Sayers's work is her belief that drama and theology united could critique each other, with the structural integrity of each acting as a corrective to excess. This mutual critique is explicit in the Introduction to *The Man Born to be King*:

> [...] there is no more searching test of theology than to submit it to dramatic handling; nothing so glaringly exposes inconsistencies in a character, a story, or a philosophy than to put it on the stage and to allow it to speak for itself. Any theology that will stand the rigorous pulling and hauling of the dramatist is pretty tough in its texture. Having subjected Catholic theology to this treatment, I am bound to bear witness that it is very tough indeed. [...] I can

[57] Sayers explicated the fourfold method used by Dante and Aquinas in "The Fourfold Interpretation of the Comedy," *Introductory Papers on Dante* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1954)), 101-26.

> only affirm that at no point have I yet found artistic truth and theological truth at variance.[58]

In *The Mind of the Maker* she applies the same principle to all creation, including God's: 'no considerations of false reverence should prevent us from subjecting the incarnations of creators to the severest tests of examination […] If the structure is truly knit, it will stand any strain, and prove its truth by its toughness.'[59] She accepts that a dogma can be skewed by the preoccupations of the artist, but her argument is that this is immediately apparent because it issues in an unconvincing scenario: 'a loose and sentimental theology begets loose and sentimental art-forms.'[60] Given the commitment never to preach encapsulated in the title of her article "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists,"[61] the facility offered by drama to explicate the church's teaching through the arm's-length medium of character, action and symbolism was something Sayers realised she could exploit to the full.

Drama and Sacrament

When Sayers invited audiences to engage hermeneutically with her plays through the combined effects of realism and symbolism, her emphasis was intellectual, but the second, and complementary, way in which her drama invited audiences to respond was in the sacramental character that brings into play non-rational forces.

In 1928, the year Masefield's play *The Coming of Christ* was performed in Canterbury Cathedral, Sybil Thorndike, well known for her performance in the title role of Shaw's *St Joan*, wrote a pamphlet *God in the Modern World: Religion and the Stage* in which she says, 'All art is sacramental in that it conveys its spiritual meaning and purpose through an outward medium or material.'[62] She goes on to compare a dramatic performance with the rite of Holy Communion. The pamphlet was part of a series entitled "Affirmations" from Sayers's publisher, Ernest Benn, and although Sayers herself was not yet writing drama it is clear that the world she entered in 1937 with her first Canterbury commission, *The Zeal of Thy House*, was one in which the sacramentality of the arts was taken for granted.

---

[58] Sayers, *Man Born*, 19.
[59] Sayers, *Mind*, 74.
[60] Sayers, *Man Born*, 19.
[61] Dorothy L Sayers, "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists" (1955), *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 7 (1986): 109-13.
[62] Sybil Thorndike, *God in the Modern World: Religion and the Stage* (London: Ernest Benn, 1928), 8.

Adrian Hastings has examined the universal move in the thirties towards a sacramental theology; '[...] an explicitly sacramental and Eucharistic theology became more and more central to Anglican and even Free Church Christians,'[63] a movement Hastings ascribes to the deterioration of the world situation:

> In the theologians of the thirties there is no blurring of natural and supernatural in some sort of liberal Christian humanism. The world is sinful and judged as such. The Church, with its sacramental fellowship, is seen as God's saving initiative within and against the world, a new creation through the incarnation, cross and resurrection. There were, of course, many variants on such a view – some more, some less biblically fundamentalistic, some more Catholic, others more Protestant – but a common note is unmistakable.[64]

In Sayers's apologetics, letters and plays there is an increasing emphasis on the human solidarity in guilt that can only be redeemed by a sacramental transformation of the individual within a worshipping community. At the same time, she was developing an aesthetic theory whereby creativity and the arts mediated the divine. These two convictions dovetailed in the creation of dramatic scenarios in which the timeless and continuing sacramentality of the whole act of creation, involving not only the writer and actors but also the audience, was made explicit in a timebound sacramental event enacted within the play itself.

The sacramental focus in Sayers's plays is linked with an insistence on the importance of the whole material world as a medium for God: 'For [the Church], matter is so good that God could make Himself a part of it [...] And this is, indeed, the great union commemorated and renewed in all the sacraments of the Church – the union of God with matter.'[65] Sayers's conviction is characteristic of the 'generalised sacramentality' that William Temple propounded in his Gifford lectures delivered between 1932 and 1934 in a section entitled "The Sacramental Universe".[66] Temple made a point of answering the objections of those who believed that a generalised sacramentality undermined the force of the single sacramental event: 'We affirm,

---

[63] Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 1920-1990 (London: SCM Press, 1991), 299.
[64] Hastings, *Christianity*, 297.
[65] Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Sacrament of Matter," in *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II*, ed. Suzanne Bray, (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008), 40.
[66] Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 473-95.

then, that unless all existence is a medium of Revelation, no particular Revelation is possible; for the possibility of Revelation depends upon the personal quality of that supreme and ultimate Reality which is God.'[67] In 1940 Sayers echoed Temple: '[Christ's] Incarnation was a supreme and particular instance of the close sacramental union of spirit and matter throughout the universe; and the sacraments also are solemn and particular occasions of that same universal union.'[68] Initially associated with theologians on the Catholic wing of Christian belief, Temple's view was being posthumously defended by the Presbyterian theologian Donald Baillie in the year of Sayers's death, 1957: 'Is there not a basic reason why material things should be taken by the Word and be consecrated to be instruments of divine grace? Do they not lend themselves to such a cause because God made them, because they are his creatures?'[69] Referring to Temple's expression 'the sacramental universe' Baillie comments that it has been used in recent times to indicate that 'sacraments in the specific sense are but concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in a special sense a sacrament unless everything were in a basic and general sense sacraments.'[70]

This view has recently been not so much challenged as refined by Rowan Williams, using the argument that the nature of a sign is to point to what it is not. Williams rejects the 'sacramental principle' enabling us to recognise divine *presence* in all things in favour of an apprehension of the Divine presence by seeing the 'not-God-ness' of things.[71] I shall argue that Sayers initially followed Temple and Baillie in believing that a sacramental event actualises the potentiality inherent in a generalised sacramentality, but that later, perhaps in response to Lewis's criticism that she had failed to maintain the concept of analogy in discussing the relationship between human creativity and divine (discussed below, pp. 101-2), she adopted a position that places more emphasis on the distance between sign and referent. In Sayers's later work analogy is preserved by the mediation of the divine through a sense of otherness comparable to that posited by Williams: for the Airman in *The Just Vengeance* 'the hidden intricacy/Of pipes, sewers, cables' is 'like a miracle and a

[67] Temple, *Nature, Man and God*, 306.
[68] Bray, *Broadcast Messages*, 38.
[69] Donald M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 43.
[70] Baillie, *Sacraments*, 42.
[71] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 218.

glory' but he wants to find a way 'to make the glory endure'.[72] A generalised sacramentality prepares him for the transformative sacramental event but is not what he ultimately seeks. I shall argue in conclusion that Sayers's drama reconciles the mid-century opposition between an immanent and transcendent God.

A few years after Sayers's death David Jones addressed the sacramentality of art in a way that forms a link between Temple's generalised sacramentality and the nuanced critique of that position adopted by Rowan Williams.[73] Jones's essay was published after Sayers's death but her parish priest, Fr Patrick McLaughlin, has spoken of Sayers's acknowledgement of the influence of Jones's close associate Eric Gill.[74] Central to Jones's argument is that humans are sign-making creatures: 'man is unavoidably a sacramentalist and […] his works are sacramental in character'[75] as a result of 'that archetypal form-making and ordering implicit in the credal clause *per quem omnia facta sunt*' in which 'they partake in some sense, however difficult to posit.'[76] Jones's repeated linking of sign and sacrament preserves the 'otherness' of human sign-making within its continuity with God's 'archetypal form-making'. Sayers's argument in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" anticipates Jones's emphasis on the sign or image as a new creation: 'The true work of art [...] is something new; it is not primarily the copy or representation of anything [...] this idea of art as creation – is, I believe, the one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics.'[77] Christianity is able to make this claim not only because human creation mirrors the divine creation but also because in Thomist terms it partakes in some way in the source of its analogical significance. At the same time, any work of art, even if it is in an identifiably mimetic and realistic mode, is the product of an independent act of craftsmanship. To quote Rowan Williams: '[…] signs are signs of what they are not: they are transformations of the world by re-ordering it, not destroying it, so that the tension of "otherness" remains.'[78]

---

[72] Sayers, *The Just Vengeance*, 293-4.
[73] David Jones, "Art and Sacrament" in *Epoch And Artist: Selected Writings by David Jones*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 143-79.
[74] Discussion recorded in *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 8.
[75] Jones, *Epoch*, 155.
[76] Jones, *Epoch*, 160.
[77] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[78] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 207.

As we have seen, Spanos's argument that a vision of the sacramentality of time animated all the Canterbury playwrights is a development of Temple's generalised sacramentalism. A sacrament contains past, present and future, operating through metaphor, symbolism and fourfold exegesis, and offering simultaneous layers of meaning, and Spanos argues that the principal theatrical strategy of the Canterbury dramatists reflects this by conflating events, people and timescales. His analysis of specific plays, however, finds that much drama under discussion, including that of Sayers, demonstrates a 'failure to fuse dramatic image and significance completely'.[79] Spanos accepts with Sayers and Temple that creation is a dynamic process, quoting Temple in *Nature, Man and God* as saying that 'the meaning, which is the ground of the poem's existence, only comes into actuality in the process of the poem's composition,'[80] but he does not pursue the implication of this for the realisation of drama in performance. For Donahoe, following Spanos, Sayers's work is sacramental in the sense that 'The sacramental aesthetic, using the doctrine of the Incarnation, results in a dramatic action that assumes the co-existence of everyday reality and the divine and whose purpose is to reactivate the sacramental imagination of the viewer.'[81] For both Donahoe and Spanos, sacramentalism operates through the layers of significance simultaneously inherent in metaphor, symbolism and religious ritual. In Sayers's case, however, there is also a drive to encourage audience appropriation of a realistic narrative that is unlike the other Canterbury drama of the thirties.

I shall follow Rowan Williams and other contemporary commentators in taking a sacrament to be an event experienced in time, and I shall suggest that this perception provides a more complete fit with the sacramentalism of Sayers's plays. Using the Anglican Catechism's definition of a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'[82] I shall argue that sacramentality is defined by its transformative qualities, and in terms of drama the central significance of this is that it unites both actors and audience in the process of enacting what it describes. Sayers certainly accepted the principle of a generalised sacramentalism in which the everyday continuously mediates the divine, but over and above this her plays increasingly take on the character of a sacramental event extended to the audience as

[79] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 327.
[80] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 25.
[81] Donahoe, "Sacramental Aesthetic," 118.
[82] *The Book of Common Prayer* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode), 348.

participants whose presence validates and activates a transformation in time. The creation of meaning in drama is a dynamic process in which both actors and audience participate.

In any discussion of the sacramental in Sayers's festival drama two key concepts are participation and liturgy. Clearly these must be modified for a discussion of the radio play *The Man Born to be King*, and in Chapter Seven I shall aim to demonstrate that the hermeneutical strategies identified in this chapter offer a different but comparable kind of participative outcome for a radio audience. In Sayers's festival plays there is always a point at which the audience is invited to be an actively participative presence, in line with a tradition of religious drama initiated in 1928 by John Masefield's *The Coming of Christ*. Each of Sayers's Canterbury plays ends with a liturgical element: *The Zeal of Thy House* concludes with the hymn "O quanta qualia" ("O what their joy and their glory must be") by Peter Abelard and then, on a similar model to Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* two years earlier, a *Te Deum*, spoken by the Archangel Michael, though this has been omitted in most performances. The *Te Deum Laudamus* is an invitation to the audience/congregation to join in an act of praise, as they would be accustomed to do when the canticle was sung in the Anglican service of Matins, and it was in this *Te Deum* that Sayers first outlined the idea of the threefold nature of creation which she developed in *The Mind of the Maker*. *The Devil to Pay* concludes with a thread of biblical quotations, beginning with 'Multitudes in the valley of decision' from Joel and ending with the hymn 'Worthy is the Lamb' from Revelation, implying a journey of redemption and commitment and perhaps drawing the audience into the spirit of praise through the familiarity of the words as the climax of Handel's *Messiah*. The process at work in Sayers's use of liturgy is similar to that described by Meg Twycross in a discussion of her own production of the medieval York "Resurrection", where the York playwright 'solves the problem [of representing a cosmic event] by drawing on the audience's experience of the sacred; he presents them with an icon […], and he uses singing to remind them of the liturgy.'[83]

The prominence of liturgy in the Canterbury plays gives a foretaste of the theology of the two post-war plays, where now Sayers explicitly defines the saving

[83] Meg Twycross, "Playing 'The Resurrection'", in *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, ed. P.L. Heyworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 273-96), 289.

community as a sacramental one. In the extended Passion sequence which concludes *The Just Vengeance* the Airman goes through a process of self-surrender in response to each of Jesus's words from the cross. In her introduction Sayers says of the Airman that 'being shown in an image the meaning of the Atonement, he accepts the Cross, and passes, in that act of choice, from the image to the reality.'[84] In other words, the action of the play provides a paradigm for the way the sacraments of the church mediate the divine, dramatising the idea that sacraments effect or cause what they signify: in the definition of Aquinas, 'significando causant.'[85] As we have seen, the symbolic nature of a play's action allows the audience to approach what they are witnessing with a sense of its otherness, experiencing a limited engagement with what they may eventually fully appropriate. *The Just Vengeance,* a highly symbolic play, manifests exactly that movement from image to reality in an act of choice.

Sayers's final festival play, *The Emperor Constantine*, written for Colchester in 1951, ends with an onstage enactment of the sacrament of baptism. The sacrament has a precise narrative and thematic function as the culmination of Constantine's spiritual journey in which he moves from belief in a God who saves the nation to a God who saves the individual. This does not run counter to the movement into community characteristic of the other plays, because Constantine's personal commitment is mediated by an awareness of a community of guilt: in *Zeal* it was expressed by the myth of the Fall, in *The Just Vengeance* by the Airman's realisation that in war 'there is no choice except between bloody alternatives,' and in *The Emperor Constantine* it happens as a result of Constantine's being manoeuvred by those around him into the execution of his innocent son Crispus. The estrangement of sin is resolved through belief in Christ, and Constantine's final commitment through Baptism is to membership of the whole Church. Where community in guilt is concerned, Faustus and Judas are slightly different cases: in thinking they can side-step communal guilt they point to its existence. Solidarity in guilt, a widespread preoccupation of theologians engaged on the theology of post-war reconstruction, became central to Sayers's later plays in which City and Empire are the *loci* of salvation. In a book admired by Sayers, J.S. Whale formulated a twentieth-century approach to the doctrine of original sin: 'Your failure matches mine and our lives

[84] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Just Vengeance* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 10.
[85] Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 27.4. http://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer27.htm#4, accessed 9.1.16.

interlock to form an organic system of evil.' [86] Whale noted that it appears as a concept in the work of writers as disparate as Augustine, Schleiermacher and Dostoievsky. The protagonists of the later plays demonstrate that, in the words of Rowan Williams, 'a capacity for baptism is linked to capacity for citizenship.'[87]

Sayers's sacramentalism, like that of her contemporary religious playwrights, starts with the generalised sacramentality in which the created universe is infused with the divine to which humans have access in moments of significance. Secondly, however, all Sayers's festival plays enact a transformative event, analogous with a sacrament in Church ritual, involving *anagnorisis* (an experience of recognition, often with life-changing consequences), penitence and reconciliation. In *Zeal* and *The Devil to Pay* there is an *anagnorisis* in which the central character realises his sin or estrangement from God and is prompted to change his life as a result, performing the outward sign of inward grace. The process happens in an intensified and more liturgical form in *The Just Vengeance* through the Airman's experience of judgment in the moment of death, and in *The Emperor Constantine* through Constantine's realisation of guilt and subsequent onstage baptism. A generalised sacramentality is the context in which the time-bound sacramental action takes place; the enacted sacramental event has the additional function of giving the audience a model of how drama itself may be experienced sacramentally.

The Sacramentality of Presence

For Sayers the penetration of a work of art by the divine does not end with the sacramental event it depicts: the play itself has a sacramental dimension actualised by the presence of a participative audience. The sacramentality of drama in performance has been explored by Sarah Beckwith in her 2001 study of the medieval York plays. In the book's Introduction Beckwith writes, 'I understand the plays as sacramental theatre. How we present ourselves to each other (the classical domain of theatre) and how we are present to each other (the domain of the sacrament) become, I argue, vital theological as well as theatrical resources in the York plays. In them theatre and sacrament become profound investigations of each other's opportunities and limits.'[88] Like Sayers, Beckwith sees theatre and theology as critiquing each

[86] J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941), 46.
[87] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 213.
[88] Sarah Beckwith, *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 8.

other. Her definition of sacramental theatre as primarily involving 'presence' has something in common with Peter Brook's "Holy Theatre", which does not necessarily imply any religious content; the term uses an analogy with religious ritual to describe 'deliberately constructed social gatherings that seek for an invisibility to interpenetrate and animate the ordinary'.[89] In both sacred and secular drama the element of community is integral to the process of giving form to the invisible and in this respect Brook's Holy Theatre is predicated on some of the same conditions as the Christian sacraments.[90] The Presence identified by both Beckwith and Brook is the heightened significance with which the action is invested for the duration of the play, a significance dependent on the interaction of the performers with an audience whose response to the actors and to each other shapes the nature of the play and is potentially transformative of themselves as individuals. Every stage actor will testify to the fact that different audiences produce a different play. Sayers's Trinitarian model of creativity, which as we shall see proposes a continuous dynamic in which the original Idea returns transformed to its source, is particularly appropriate to dramatic performance, in which the audience can be seen as collaborating with the actors in a work of creation.

The centrality of community to a sacramental understanding of the arts is seen in the use of the Eucharist as a paradigm by Christian aestheticians, reflecting the fact that in Eucharistic theology the participating community is transformed and itself becomes the offering of the body of Christ. Beckwith quotes Eliot's director E. Martin Browne in the thirties: 'All religious drama [...] should strive to attain participation in a common experience vicariously suffered, whose perfect model is The Eucharist.'[91] More recently Richard Harries has similarly suggested that the drama of Holy Week as embodied in Christian ritual is paradigmatic of all drama: 'The drama of Holy Week is one in which we fully participate and by which we are changed';[92] 'The eternal Word, creatively present in all drama, is disclosed in the movement from Palm Sunday to Easter.'[93] Sayers does not go so far as to suggest

[89] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 64.
[90] Kevin J. Vanhoozer interprets Holy Theatre in exclusively religious terms as 'a way of realizing the presence of Christ through a way of being present to one another. The implicit assumption is that by performing the life of Christ, the people become the body of Christ.' Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The drama of doctrine : a canonical-linguistic approach to Christian theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 408.
[91] Beckwith, *Signifying*, xv.
[92] Richard Harries, *Art and the Beauty of God* (London: Mowbray, 1993), 120.
[93] Harries, *Art and Beauty*, 121.

that the Eucharist supersedes all other paradigmatic forms of sacramentality, although she knew Martin Browne and his work. Her belief that 'the dogma is the drama' finds a more nuanced counterpart in Beckwith's idea that theatre and sacrament become 'investigations of each other's opportunities and limits' through an understanding of 'the constitutive links of a theatre and a theology of the sacrament through a community of participation.'[94]

The sacramentality of Presence in drama is more than Temple's generalised sacramentality because it is predicated on community. The readiness of the audience to go the imaginative journey in community with the players, 'appropriating' the narrative in Rowan Williams's terms, is the sacralising force that becomes the catalyst for 'Presence', making the event potentially transformative. This is true on both a religious and secular understanding of Presence: theorists such as Brook understand it as an invisible reality that is visible in its effects, while a secular understanding of presence as a process in art can be found in Alex Danchev's comments on Cezanne's late work: 'The painter succeeds in "realizing," not only what is present, but presence itself; that is to say, not only the thing, but the "thinging" – the thing becoming thing, the world becoming world – the destination and the journey.'[95] In a 2009 study of contemporary religious drama Todd Johnson addresses the sacramentality of Presence in his discussion of theatre as 'transformative encounter': 'In the past fifty years [...] there has been a shift from understanding presence as being within an object to focusing on presence in the sacramental action that a community performs. This approach to sacramentality assumes that God's presence is primarily "peopled".'[96] Williams expresses a similar view when he writes that 'the Christian sacraments are not just epiphanies of the sacred,'[97] because sacraments are 'sacramental actions' rather than 'sacralised' objects.

> While theologians have sometimes rather loosely talked about the sacramental 'principle' in Christianity as an affirmation of some inherent capacity in material things to bear divine meanings, the actual shape and rhetoric of sacramental *actions* says more about how such meanings emerge from a process of estrangement, surrender and re-creation that we might

[94] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 148.
[95] Alex Danchev, *Cezanne: A Life* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 357.
[96] Todd E. Johnson and Dale Savidge, *Performing the Sacred* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009), 66.
[97] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 209.

> expect if we begin only from the rather bland appeal to the natural sacredness of things that occasionally underpins sacramental theology.[98]

It will be a task of this study to probe beyond 'natural sacredness' to the dramatic significance of 'sacramental actions' within Sayers's work.

It may be argued that the definition of religious drama as a 'transformative encounter' with a sacramental dimension sidesteps the issue of drama's fictive qualities. The concept of mimesis was a stumbling block not only, famously, for Plato but also for the eighth century iconoclasts and for the Protestant reformers, with its implication that art is imitation and therefore not merely not the real thing but even possibly a deception. Beckwith addresses mimesis as a problem for authenticity within a performance by examining the nature of a sign, concluding that 'the York Crucifixion is paradigmatically theatrical: it reflects in its manifest content the structure of any theatrical event. That is, in it a character stands in for a character who stands in for other characters.'[99] The implications of this will be discussed in Chapter Six. Beckwith takes the performative nature of drama and uses it to redefine mimesis as creative proliferation, taking the same line as Sayers who in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" recategorised what had been regarded as drama's fictive qualities by suggesting that the term 'mimesis' had been replaced in Christian iconography by the open-ended concept of the 'image'.[100] More recently Harries has drawn on the eighth century iconoclasm debate to argue that images are essential to a revealed religion: 'The invisible has been made visible and we must make that clear.'[101] Twycross approaches the question of the York plays' fictionality by observing that the audience, who in her production, as with Sayers's festival dramas, were very close to the actors, are prepared to maintain the fictional contract at the same time as transgressing it:

> Despite the lack of physical separation, the actors are still inhabitants of the world of the play, the audience still onlookers. The illusion is not 'broken'. But the playwright uses this physical closeness to extend as it were the terms of the contract between them. The characters (not merely the actors) are made to acknowledge the audience's presence, and to make use of it.'[102]

---

[98] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 210.
[99] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 70.
[100] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[101] Harries, *Art and Beauty*, 122.
[102] Twycross, "Resurrection," 275.

According to Twycross, the relationship between actors and audience is

> [...] as much part of the dramatic illusion as the more obvious forms of stagecraft. The interesting thing is that this appears to be recognised openly. This is part and parcel of what seems to be in medieval theatre a heightened consciousness of the whole fact of dramatic illusion.[103]

Twycross's observations will be of particular relevance to Sayers's own mystery play in the central section of *The Just Vengeance*.

Beckwith's suggestion that the enactment of the Crucifixion in the York mysteries provides a paradigm for the way theatre itself operates makes a theoretical link between the medieval mysteries and Sayers's religious drama, particularly *The Just Vengeance*. I shall argue that Sayers's peopled dramatisations of the sacrament of repentance as events within a play (William's incomplete confession, Faustus's deathbed repentance, the Airman's response to judgment, Constantine's confession of guilt followed by his deathbed baptism) provide a paradigm for the way the wider sacrament of theatre is to be received by an audience, and that in each case theological repentance follows a theatrical *anagnorisis*. In *Zeal* the Church's formal confession does not release William from his unconfessed guilt; it is only when he engages with the Archangel Michael in a vision that his sin becomes real to him and Michael completes the sacrament by giving absolution. Faustus likewise has to have his eyes opened to the true nature of evil, reassessing the pact with Mephistopheles in the light of it. The Airman is brought to repentance by the recognition that Christ is bearing the burden of his own sin, prompting him to journey with Jesus until the final surrender, and Constantine's repentance follows the terrible revelation that he has executed his own innocent son, again leading to a reinterpretation of the events of the past. The sacramental event within Sayers's plays, following a transformative *anagnorisis*, shows the audience how drama itself collaborates with theology as a transformative medium.

Theology and Creativity

Sayers was not only a religious playwright but also a writer of apologetics, and she reflected in depth, and in the letters wrote at length, on the theology of her craft. The

[103] Twycross, "Resurrection," 276.

daughter of an Anglican clergyman, educated at home until the age of fifteen, she was familiar with theological ideas from her earliest years but it is clear from the letters that in the thirties, finding herself invited to write articles in the national press, she set about the task of extending her reading in contemporary theology. In July 1941 Sayers published a letter in *World Review* giving a list of 'leading Christian thinkers', starting with Jacques Maritain.[104] This is our first indication that she was familiar with Maritain's works, but as Sayers spoke fluent French it is not impossible that she might have read his works in the original, or in the 1923 translation of *Art and Scholasticism*, while in the thirties Maritain's ideas were given wider currency through the writings of Eric Gill. Maritain asserted that 'Artistic creation does not copy God's creation, but continues it,'[105] qualifying his assertion by saying that the human artist is not like God a cause of things but gathers material 'in the vast treasure of created things'.[106] Sayers explored this in *Mind*, developing an aesthetic theology whereby the creative act mirrors and participates in the dynamic operation of the Trinity. As we have seen, Sayers was criticised by Lewis for failing to maintain the concept of analogy in *Mind*, but she may in fact have been influenced by Maritain's assertion of continuity and have been deliberately steering a middle course.

Rowan Williams has identified the two key features of Maritain's influence on artists in the first half of the twentieth century:

> Maritain's great contribution was twofold. First, he insisted on the integrity of the artwork – its essential independence of any message or propagandist value - and did so on the grounds of a specifically Christian philosophical stand point. Second, he identified the labour of art as something rooted in the sense of an unfinishedness in 'ordinary' perception, a recognition that the objects of perception were not exhausted by what could be said about them in descriptive, rational and pragmatic terms.[107]

These two tenets influenced not only David Jones and Flannery O'Connor, whom Williams discusses, but also writers as different as Eliot, Tolkien and Sayers herself. The Neo-Scholastic movement of which Maritain was a twentieth century leader

---

[104] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 257.

[105] Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, trans. J.F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1947 (1930)), 49.

[106] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 48.

[107] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum Books, 2005), x.

went beyond the sphere of the arts and literature and was the driving force behind the insistence of writers such as Chesterton on the limits of empiricism, though it had its detractors, among them Lewis who in private correspondence dismissed the movement as a 'high brow fad'.[108]

The two perceptions identified by Williams might be seen as according with the main thrust of each of Sayers's two works on aesthetics, *The Mind of the Maker* and "Towards a Christian Aesthetic". The integrity of a work of art is the primary focus of *Mind*, as Sayers develops the theory of a human creative process analogous with and partaking of the nature of the Trinity, with God the Father as the timeless Idea, indivisible from the Energy that realises it in material form (the Son), and the Power that communicates with the receptive mind or soul. The internal dynamic of this concept gives the work of art the freedom of God's own creation as part of the continuity mentioned by Maritain, proceeding from the artist but in the end independent of him or her. The point at which a work of art achieves an independent existence is the point at which the artist's task becomes that of serving rather than controlling the work. Once this development is under way, any attempt to enlist the work for purposes such as propaganda constitutes unfaithfulness to the work, and in *Mind* Sayers amusingly illustrates literary assaults on the essential good of the work. Remote as her plays were from Eliot's in style, they both insisted that plays which proceeded ultimately from the author's Christian understanding of the world could only speak obliquely of eternal truth.

According to Maritain, 'Art, then, is fundamentally constructive and creative. It is the faculty of producing, not of course *ex nihilo*, but out of a pre-existing matter, a new creature, an original being capable in its turn of moving a human soul.'[109] The qualification 'not of course *ex nihilo*' identifies the point of divergence between those who see creativity as an analogy and those who see it as continuation, but the point can be used both ways, since it could be argued that the pre-existence of the human artist's material means that the resulting work of art is by definition an extension of God's creation. The perception of art as a continuum proceeding from God and adding to his infinite creation has something in common with the arguments of eighth century iconophiles such as John of Damascus, and also with the concept of

[108] C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis Volume II: Books, Broadcasts and the War, 1931-1949*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 134.
[109] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 49.

claritas or radiance identified by Aquinas and taken up by Maritain as a property of a work of art. In her study of the theology of Chesterton and Tolkien, Alison Milbank demonstrates how *claritas* works in practice in the writing of Chesterton: a process of defamiliarisation through the use of paradox and the grotesque opens up the way for a new recognition of the essential subject as radiant and pointing beyond itself to its divine origin.[110] As we have seen, the recognition of otherness is a central concept for the therapist Grainger and the theologian Williams, and also for the critic Beckwith in her analysis of the way signs point towards God within the dramatic encounter.

This study of Sayers's fusion of theology and drama will locate her work within the twentieth century Neo-Thomist movement along with Maritain, Chesterton, Eliot, Charles Williams, Eric Gill and David Jones, all of them Roman Catholics or High Church Anglicans. In varying degrees these writers saw human creativity as an extension of or analogy with God's creativity, the view developed by Sayers in *The Mind of the Maker*, although we should bear in mind that the divine character of human creativity is a contested concept not only in discussions of Sayers's debt to Maritain but also in the work of international theologians such as von Balthasar and Barth. In "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" Sayers addressed Lewis's criticism of *Mind* by emphasizing the analogous rather than continuous nature of the human creative process, but at the same time she maintained with Maritain the continuity inherent in the fact that humans 'can create only within that framework [of the universe] and out of that material which the universe supplies.'[111] If art continues God's creation in this sense, the act of creating still entails a process of generation in which there are no limits, and it is in this freedom that God may be encountered. Sayers's synthesis of different approaches to creativity is closely linked with her inclusive sacramentalism. A generalised sacramentalism tends to see human creation as continuous with God's, whereas event-sacramentalism emphasizes its analogical nature.

In *The Mind of the Maker*, Sayers's starting point is the fact that God creates, and she takes this primary attribute as the respect in which humankind is made in God's image. It follows that human creativity has a relation to God's, and whether this

[110] Alison Milbank, *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2009).
[111] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.

means it is comparable with or participating in God's essential creativity, the effect is that humans continue God's work of creation in the world. Sayers proposes a Trinitarian structure to the creative process: Idea, Energy and Power, corresponding with the persons of the Trinity and for practical purposes indivisible in action, and she draws on her own experience as a critic and creator of literature to illustrate the operation of the paradigm. In order to realise the Idea, the Energy needs to conceive it 'in material terms of flesh and blood and paint and canvas. For the true freedom of the Energy consists in its willing submission to the limitations of its own medium.'[112] Central to the argument in literature is the creature's ultimate independence of its creator: only thus can love emancipate the creature to behave in accordance with the character established for it in a process of co-creation in which each new attribute builds on the past and determines the future. 'It does sometimes happen that the plot requires from its characters certain behaviour, which, when it comes to the point, no ingenuity on the author's part can force them into, except at the cost of destroying them.'[113] The characters in a book or play become moral agents in the sense that they have been given a set of attributes that must chime with their choices within the fiction, just as human beings in the world are set free by God to make the choices that will bring them into communion with him. The writer can 'behave exactly as, in our more egotistical and unenlightened petitions, we try to persuade God to behave,'[114] but the result will be a loss of power, and '[...] we may ask ourselves how much power would be left in the story of the crucifixion, as a story, if Christ had come down from the cross.'[115] The relationship of the author to her fictional characters is discovered to be analogous with God's relationship to his creation. Choice as we shall see is central to Sayers's fictional world and this is above all the characteristic that unites the detective fiction and the plays and will prompt an examination of the moral and theological thread that links the two.

The freedom of literary creations is given a whole new sphere of possible further freedoms by drama in performance, where no two presentations of the text are identical. An author will always welcome 'the individual creativeness which the actor brings to his part'.[116] A play shares with other performing arts the quality of

[112] Sayers, *Mind*, 52.
[113] Sayers, *Mind*, 54.
[114] Sayers, *Mind*, 63.
[115] Sayers, *Mind*, 67.
[116] Sayers, *Mind*, 51.

proliferating generativity beyond the range of responses possible with a creation captured by a material medium such as sculpture. The realisation of a play in performance will generate a new creation in every re-presentation of the text, and each actor's assumption of a role within this creative framework is a further act of creation. Interactions of these new selves within a production generate yet further creations, and each performance renews the dynamic in a slightly different way. Every performance is a time-limited point of entry to and exit from the conception of the production as a continuous whole, and beyond that to the work of art as a timeless constant. This is a further respect in which drama and sacrament are paradigmatic of each other within Sayers's theology. Just as the Church's sacraments are time-bound events within the continuous penetration of the material by the divine, so the performance of a play offers a moment of heightened access to creative overflow within the continuing witness of the text to the generativity of creation.

In *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers writes: 'The business of the creator is not to escape from his material medium or to bully it, but to serve it; but to serve it he must love it. This is true, not only of all literary art but of all creative art.'[117] 'Serving the work' is an idea Sayers found in Maritain, and she used it repeatedly. Freedom is found through love in both the artistic and moral spheres: to love is to give freedom to the object of love. The close connection between the aesthetic and the moral spheres will be important in our discussion of the link between Sayers's detective fiction and her drama.

Theoretical Paradigm and Research Philosophy

Sayers has supplied her own theoretical paradigm for creative work, and for Sayers all work is potentially creative, in *The Mind of the Maker* and "Towards a Christian Aesthetic". She also commented extensively on her own working methods and theology in the letters. Most commentators take Sayers's own paradigm as a starting-point for analysis but clearly their status in relation to the writing on which they are commenting is not the same as that of the light that might be shed by an external theoretician such as Aristotle or Rowan Williams. Sayers is such an acute and well-informed commentator on her own work, however, that the task of going beyond the author's own analysis can be a challenge. I shall start with Sayers's own paradigms and then move beyond them to the theological background to Sayers's plays. The

[117] Sayers, *Mind*, 53.

discussion will include the writings of Temple and Maritain who were direct influences, and the correspondence with those who helped Sayers to develop her ideas, notably Herbert Kelly SSM and Charles Williams. A discussion of sacramentality in drama generally will be mediated by writers on the arts and theology since Sayers's death such as David Jones and Rowan Williams, and by contemporary theorists of the medieval mysteries such as Meg Twycross, Pamela King and Sarah Beckwith.

The two senses in which the dogma may be the drama, both as narrative and as enactment, means that no single theoretical paradigm covers the whole of Sayers work, but central to both senses is the idea that the creative act by its very nature is open-ended, endlessly inviting new possibilities, a view which as we have seen is associated in the twentieth century with Maritain and the writers he influenced. This open-endedness may on the face of it seem at odds with the fact that like Chesterton, Williams and Lewis, Sayers saw creation in terms of a pattern, discussed more fully in Chapter Eight. In "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" Sayers describes the response to art or literature as 'the recognition of truth that tells us something about ourselves that we had not always been saying, something that puts a new knowledge of ourselves within our grasp. It is new, startling, and perhaps shattering, and yet it comes to us with a sense of familiarity. We did not know it before, but the moment the poet has shown it to us, we know that, somehow or other, we had always really known it.'[118] The recognition inherent in newness can be illuminated by Sayers's suggestion in *Mind* that the mental structures of human creativity mirror those of the Trinity: the newness issues from the essential generativity of creation, while the pattern is found in the Trinitarian process which initiates that generation.

The impulse to remake traditional forms while retaining a thread of connection with the past and accepting a work of art's independent life in the future is a characteristically Modernist enterprise, and although Sayers shared with contemporaries such as Chesterton and Lewis a suspicion of what they saw as the determinism of Freud and Marx I believe that her work is best understood in the context of those writers who reflected a Modernist sensibility. The obsessive search for a pattern is inevitably bound up with the perception of fragmentariness, and in the sense in which Eliot, Sayers and Charles Williams embraced the centrality of pattern,

[118] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 39.

it is a framework within which constant re-evaluation takes place, as expressed by Eliot in *Four Quartets*:

> For the pattern is new in every moment
> And every moment is a new and shocking
> Valuation of all we have been.[119]

The Neo-Thomist movement accepted restatement and re-evaluation as essential theological tools, and the whole of Sayers's drama can be seen as holding pattern and restatement in tension. The idea of reality as a generative pattern which can be understood once the viewer has found a way inside is, as I shall argue, embodied in Sayers's drama by uniting the general sacramentality of artistic creation with a unique sacramental event within the play. Further, the sacramental event within a play may itself be seen as a paradigm for the way theatre works, an ostension drawing on the ideas about presence developed by contemporary theorists of medieval drama. The dramatic enactment of a sacramental ritual through which a community seeks access to the invisible may be understood by the play's audience as a demonstration of what they themselves are at that moment experiencing.

The Man Born to be King and other radio plays, however, do not offer their audiences a live sacramental event. In Sayers's dramatic work for radio, in place of the event in which sacramental presence is mediated by a live audience, Sayers uses the audience's appropriation of the narrative to initiate a hermeneutic process. As we have seen in the writings of Rowan Williams, this appropriation derives its transformative effect from an awareness of otherness, both the specific otherness of characters represented by actors and the invisible otherness to which the ubiquity of symbolism points, creating a gap that is finally bridged by the revaluation of the experience as it is described above by Eliot. This is true of both the sacramental appropriation of a live performance and the hermeneutical participation in a broadcast script. As we shall see, *The Man Born to be King* also points towards a continuation of the transformation process beyond the end of the play: faith is to be attained through paying close attention to the words of revelation, within and beyond the drama. The character Judas chooses damnation by limiting his horizon of understanding, whereas the audience is invited to journey with the other disciples in a continuing hermeneutic endeavour after the play's end. While Sayers's stage plays

[119] Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 179.

draw the audience into an active theological engagement through liturgy, *The Man Born to be King* invites the listeners into an unfolding hermeneutical experience and shows them how to process it when the play is over. In both cases a participative response is central.

In Sayers's mind drama and theology were integrally linked: the purpose of this study is to investigate the theory and practice of that link in Sayers's work. I shall aim to demonstrate and contextualise the fact that for Sayers drama mediates the divine first in the overall nature of its creativity, as outlined in the Trinitarian process described in *Mind*, and secondly through the enactment of theology in performance. These two ways in which her plays body forth the divine can also be described in terms of the generativity of a diachronic narrative, or in terms of the experience of presence which is a characteristic every theatrical encounter. I shall argue that a sacramental understanding of the nature of drama, as expounded both by Sayers's contemporaries and by modern commentators, is at the heart of a theatrical practice which always points beyond the life of the performance to a future in which the audience will continue to process the transformations effected by the drama. This investigation will open up the nature of drama as a mode of religious expression and help to locate Sayers in the context of other mid-twentieth century writers. For some commentators, the surface of Sayers's writing can be too ostentatiously educative: I shall argue that her weakness for erudite references is trivial compared with the unspoken theological encounter that is embodied in the fabric and structure of her plays.

Sayers's sacramental theology is predicated on the belief that God is manifest in the whole of creation, and we have seen that her plays incorporate an invitation to appropriate the belief along with the narratives in which it is embodied. She insisted, however, that her primary aim was not to persuade but to inform; I shall suggest that, both in Sayers's work and in general, intellectual and affective responses are ultimately inseparable. This study is written from a perspective close to Sayers's own: it aims to discuss theology as far as possible in terms that avoid excluding readers who do not subscribe to the belief-system within which it is written, and in this respect it draws on the approach characteristic of Peter Brook in a book widely

admired by secular theatre practitioners: 'A holy theatre not only presents the invisible but also offers conditions that make its perception possible.'[120]

Dorothy L. Sayers: A Brief Life

Dorothy Leigh Sayers was born in Oxford in 1893. Her father, an Anglican clergyman, was headmaster of Christ Church Choir School and when Sayers was four he was appointed Rector of Bluntisham in the Huntingdonshire fens. The fact that the family's servants chose to go with them suggests a happy household.[121] Sayers was educated at home by her father and a series of governesses until in 1909, at the age of fifteen, she went as a boarder to the Godolphin School in Salisbury, where she took full advantage of opportunities to be involved in drama as a writer, actor and stage manager. She returned to Oxford as an undergraduate in 1912 to read French at Somerville College, gaining first class honours, although women were not formally awarded degrees at Oxford until 1920. Sayers's undergraduate letters to her parents are remarkably frank, describing romantic encounters and additions to her colourful wardrobe: although in later life she was very overweight, photos from her early years show that she was an attractive young woman. Sayers graduated in 1915 and following a spell of teaching in Hull she returned to Oxford in 1917 as an apprentice to the publisher Basil Blackwell, who published her two early volumes of verse. Many of her male contemporaries had been killed or were suffering from shell-shock. From 1919 to 1920 she worked in a French school near Paris, L'Ecole des Roches, organising exchanges and doing some teaching.

Sayers read crime novels for entertainment during her year in France and on her return to London she started writing her first detective novel.[122] After several teaching jobs, in 1922 she found more congenial employment in Benson's advertising agency, where she stayed for seven years and is credited with the "Guinness is good for you" campaign. Benson's is immortalised in *Murder Must Advertise,*[123] a book in which Sayers exposes the deceptions of advertising but also revels in the verbal ingenuity and sheer creativeness that produce a good slogan. In 1921 she met the Russian émigré novelist John Cournos and fell in love with him, but their affair was not consummated. Cournos claimed not to believe in the

[120] Brook, *Empty Space*, 56.
[121] Reynolds, *Life and Soul*, 7.
[122] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Whose Body?* (London: New English Library, 1968 (1923)).
[123] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Murder Must Advertise* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933).

institution of marriage, while Sayers was at this stage unwilling to use contraception: the 1930 Lambeth Conference was the first to endorse individual freedom of conscience for Anglicans in this matter,[124] and Sayers's own churchmanship was Anglo-Catholic. Aspects of the relationship with Cournos are reworked in *Strong Poison*.[125] When she and Cournos went their separate ways, Sayers had an affair with a married man, Bill White, and became pregnant with a son, John Anthony, who was born in January 1924. Sayers is unlikely to have known that White was married at the start of the affair, but it was his wife who arranged a discreet maternity bed for her near Bournemouth. Barbara Reynolds has described how the details of the birth, long a subject of speculation, were revealed to her by White's daughter.[126] John was brought up by Sayers's cousin Ivy, but Sayers kept his existence a secret from almost everyone else, including her parents.

Towards the end of 1925 Sayers met Mac Fleming, a divorced man whom she married in a register office in April 1926. A veteran of the Boer War and of World War I, in both of which he had also been special correspondent, Mac was a motoring, crime and food journalist, and with him Sayers initially found the companionship and sexual enjoyment she had been looking for. Although by the mid-thirties Mac's shell-shock and alcoholism had started to make him a difficult companion, Sayers's correspondence speaks of him with affection up to his death in 1950. In 1929 Sayers's parents were both dead and she and Mac moved into her mother's house in Witham, Essex, keeping her London flat as a pied à terre.

When Sayers made the change from novelist to playwright in the mid-thirties, it inevitably meant spending more time in London. During the War she was an Air Raid Warden and a committed knitter of socks for seamen, but her main war work was apologetics, notably with *The Man Born to be King*, *The Mind of the Maker* (both 1941) and a number of radio broadcasts. At Archbishop William Temple's Malvern Conference of 1941 (discussed below, pp. 71-4) Sayers was the only woman speaker and in May of that year she was again a speaker at the Sword of the Spirit Conference, an ecumenical initiative by the Roman Catholic Church which took place during a weekend of heavy aerial bombardment. James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, and his assistant Eric Fenn provided a platform

[124] See resolution 15 at http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930.pdf.
[125] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1930).
[126] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 437-41.

for religious talks on BBC radio, among them Sayers's 1941 series on God the Son.[127] Reynolds has shown that Sayers was passionately patriotic, writing in 1944 to the Prime Minister of Canada: 'For nearly nine hundred years we have kept the gate of Europe open [...] But the gate is getting too heavy for us to hold alone.'[128]

Sayers's 1946 play *The Just Vengeance* (pp. 138-78 below) is framed by a response to the war seen through the eyes of an Airman killed in battle and facing judgment. It also reflects a new passion that was to absorb her until the end of her life: translating Dante. A second, London-based, activity of Sayers's postwar years was involvement with St Anne's House in Soho, launched in 1943 as a centre for open-minded theological enquiry and presided over by two High Anglican priests, Fr Patrick McLaughlin and Fr Gilbert Shaw. The church itself had been bombed during the war and the parish was amalgamated with that of St Thomas's, Regent Street, where Sayers became a churchwarden. The house in Witham was still her main home, however, and in 1957 Sayers died there of a sudden heart attack. She had spent the day in London buying Christmas presents and had also inspected her new portrait by William Hutchison, now in the National Portrait Gallery.[129] It is poignant to imagine that on the last day of her life she contemplated the image of herself as others saw her and perhaps asked herself whether it was an authentic likeness. Her ashes are deposited in the tower of St Anne's with a quotation from her article "Why Work?": 'The only Christian work is good work well done.'[130]

Sayers asked that no biography should be written until fifty years after her death, but as we saw above (p. 3), her wishes were not carried out. There has inevitably been speculation that her request was prompted by the existence of a son born out of wedlock, but it almost certainly also reflects her strong belief that the work of a creative artist should speak for itself. This theme, closely linked with her commitment to a sacramental understanding of life and work, appears in Sayers's work in all genres and will inform the following discussion of her religious plays.

---

[127] Sayers's wartime talks have been edited and introduced by Suzanne Bray in *The Christ of the Creeds*.
[128] Reynolds, *Life and Soul*, 351.
[129] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 270.
[130] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Why Work?" in *Creed or Chaos? and other Essays in Popular Theology* (London: Methuen, 1947), 59.

Chapter Two
Beginnings: Dramas of the Soul's Choice

This chapter examines the types of drama that influenced Sayers's practice, including medieval drama, the historical pageants popular in the first half of the twentieth century, and the contemporary drama of Charles Williams. The second part of the chapter identifies themes in Sayers's detective novels which are carried over into the plays, and the final section examines the implications of this dual stream of influence for Sayers's aesthetic theory.

Forms of Drama

Sayers was interested in drama from an early age, acting out elaborate scenes from *The Three Musketeers* with family members, briefly wondering about a career on stage, and including a short satirical morality play, *The Mocking of Christ*, in her first collection of poetry, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*.[1] She studied medieval French at Oxford and it is not surprising that she described a number of her mature plays in medieval terms, for instance *The Just Vengeance* as both a pageant and a miracle play. I shall consider the influence of both genres on Sayers's festival plays.

The massive loss of life in World War I prompted many people to ask fundamental questions about life and death without being satisfied by the formulaic answers often given by the Church. Drama was a way of exploring such issues. John Masefield's 1916 verse drama *Good Friday* describes the Crucifixion in terms that suggest the contemporary battlefield:

> The creaking door of flesh rolls slowly back;
> Nerve by red nerve the links of living crack.[2]

Although Jesus is not a character in this play, a number of Masefield's religious plays were refused public performance by the censor because they required Jesus to be played by an actor, a restriction that continued officially until 1966 and had its

[1] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1916).
[2] John Masefield, *Good Friday* (Heinemann, 1921 (1916)), 49.



Fig. 2. The Finale of the York Pageant, 1909, representing cities of York worldwide.



Fig. 3. The York cycle of Mystery Plays, 1954: the release of Barabbas

effect on Sayers's own drama.[3] By the late 1920s there was a considerable body of religious verse drama being written that often narrowly avoided censorship restrictions, and it was in this context that The Religious Drama Society was founded in 1929 under the presidency of George Bell, the newly-elected Bishop of Chichester who as Dean of Canterbury had founded the Canterbury Festival, commissioning new plays from verse dramatists until the outbreak of World War II. In the world of amateur theatre there was also a strong tradition of drama on religious themes, some of which achieved a national profile, for instance *Eager Heart* by Alice Buckton.[4]

Pageants

Before the appearance of the twentieth century's great plays on religious subjects, for instance Shaw's *St Joan* (1924) and Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), the dramatisation of religious themes was familiar to the public through historical community pageants, which were often associated with the local church. Sayers grew up in a rural vicarage and we know that in 1908, aged fifteen, she contributed to the Somersham village pageant as one of the scriptwriters and that she also, as an accomplished violinist, performed as one of the pageant's three musicians.[5] Pageants were a means whereby the church and the local community could collaborate, giving people, particularly women, an opportunity to engage in theatre without raising eyebrows (Fig. 2, p. 38). By the mid-century village pageants were becoming hackneyed, but meanwhile in London the pageant form was attracting new writers who transformed it almost beyond recognition, notably T.S. Eliot and Charles Williams, and the sense in which Sayers's *The Just Vengeance* (1946) is a pageant depends on that transformation. Major pageants continued to be mounted as part of national celebrations, for instance the Warwick Castle Coronation Pageant in 1953.

When George Bell decided to introduce dramatic performances into Canterbury Cathedral, a project reinforced by seeing *Jedermann* (*Everyman*) in Salzburg, his first choice was a popular London pageant, *The Joyous Pageant of the Holy Nativity* by Charles Claye. In the event he found Claye's drama too sentimental, and instead

[3] In 1966 the automatic ban on portrayals of Christ was rescinded, and in 1968 all pre-censorship by the Lord Chamberlain was abolished by the Theatres Act. See Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama* 1900-1968, vol. 4: The Sixties (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2015), 169, and below, 144-5.

[4] A.M. Buckton, *Eager-Heart: A Christmas Mystery Play* (London: Methuen, 1934 (1904)).

[5] Martin Ferguson Smith, "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Somersham Pageant of 1908," *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 28 (2011): 79-96.

commissioned John Masefield's *The Coming of Christ* (1928), which uses elements of pageant, mystery play and liturgy in a formula Sayers was later to adopt for *The Just Vengeance*.[6] Masefield's play was influential, and the pageant in this modified form provided a basis for some of the most significant religious plays of the thirties. In 1932 Bell, by then Bishop of Chichester, convened a conference of people interested in religious drama, including E. Martin Browne, who mentored and directed all T.S. Eliot's plays, Eliot himself, and Charles Williams. Bell subsequently summed up their conclusions:

> For church plays it was thought […] that the most suitable kind of play would be the masque with a certain amount of formality and also with music and a good deal of the art of ceremony. In such plays there should be no lively characterisation but the persons should rather be ideas clothed in flesh. Great stress was laid on the need for ceremony, and as it were the static and formal character of the production.

Philosophical discussion would be possible within these limitations, but

> […] 'problem' plays of questions of ethics were definitely to be ruled out […] Masefield's *The Coming of Christ* had something of the nature of the masque though the scene between the shepherds was rather a departure from the form.[7]

Bell deliberately underplays Masefield's social radicalism: in *The Coming of Christ* the shepherds question the morality of war before, more conventionally, heading to the stable for an act of worship focusing on the Christ-child, with which the audience/congregation are invited to associate themselves either by coming forward or in spirit from the pew. This mixture of genres provided a prototype for the next dozen years, and in spite of Bell's nervousness about 'problem plays', the political comment introduced by Masefield also proved prototypical.

T.S. Eliot's first full-length play, *The Rock*, a sequence of fictional church-building scenes from the history of London written to launch the Forty Churches Fund in 1934, was conceived as an outdoor pageant based on a scenario supplied by Browne. Its Chorus enjoys the melancholy use of paradox familiar from Eliot's better-known work:

---

[66] Masefield used the device of "Anima Christi" to speak the words of Jesus, something Sayers echoed with the "Persona Dei" of *The Just Vengeance*.

[7] George Bell, Memorandum, File 151, 216. Bell Papers, Lambeth Palace Library.

> Where is the life we have lost in living?
> Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?[8]

The Builders Alf and Bert (Ethelbert) reappear in different periods, and in a modern incarnation discuss Keynesian economics in a working class voice that recalls *The Waste Land* and *Sweeney Agonistes*: 'Ain't you ever 'eard me speak o' the principles of Social Credit Reform?'[9] The play's knockabout energy overflows into popular songs in which the audience joined, while a scene from the Crusades incorporates the Latin hymnody of 'Vexilla Regis': a mixture of social realism with quasi-liturgical elements that harks back to *The Coming of Christ*. Such intellectual pageants by major dramatists (another was Charles Williams's 1939 *Judgement at Chelmsford*, discussed in Chapter Six) had their effect on public expectation of the genre and by the time *The Just Vengeance* appeared in 1946, the pageant as a series of historical tableaux was in decline.

Two examples from 1941, one real and one fictional, illustrate the kind of expectation that provided a context for Sayers's use of the form. The first is the Nativity pageant written and produced by Madeline, Lady Lees of Lytchett Minster, Dorset.[10] The Nativity story is framed by a procession of Nations, girls and boys in national costume emerging from the nave audience, representing the 'people that walked in darkness' from Isaiah 9.2 whose national life will be transformed by the 'great light' of Jesus's birth. The pageant combines nationalism with a commitment to peace, and in a "Plan for England's Re-Awakening" Lady Lees ascribes the current crisis to the penetration of 'atheistic materialism, emanating largely from the German universities [...] into the upper-class homes and the universities of England.'[11] Letters of support from Cardinal Hinsley and Archbishops Lang and Temple are quoted. A programme of education is urgently needed, and Lees cites as inspiration not only Oberammergau and *The Man Born to be King* but also the vision of religious drama centres in every village proposed by Sir Francis Younghusband to the League of Nations.[12] Far though Madeline Lees's pageant is from the literariness

---

[8] T.S. Eliot, *The Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), 7.
[9] Eliot, *Rock*, 12.
[10] Lady Lees, *The Lytchett-Minster Nativity Play* (printed for private circulation, 4th edition, 1949 (1941)).
[11] Lees, *Nativity*, 10.
[12] Lees was on a government blacklist for her supposedly subversive views but was not a pacifist. See Patrick French, *Younghusband* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 377.

of Eliot and Sayers, it is an example of the fact that by the forties the form was likely to be linked to a political or theological message. A second, fictional example of a pageant is from Virginia Woolf's posthumous novel *Between the Acts*, in which a village pageant meanders rather uncertainly through different periods in English history until the final scene in which characters of the play step forward with mirrors and other reflective objects:

> Look! Out they come [...] Holding what? Tin cans? Bedroom candlesticks? Old jars? My dear, that's the cheval glass from the Rectory! And the mirror – that I lent her. My mother's. Cracked. What's the notion? Anything that's bright enough to reflect, presumably, ourselves?[13]

An unidentified voice on a megaphone invites the audience to 'look at ourselves' and see 'orts, scraps and fragments'.[14] In 1941 a historical pageant could not conclude with nationalist self-congratulation, and Woolf provides this satirical, Gothic conclusion. In 1946, when the Dean of Lichfield expressed reservations about a scene in *The Just Vengeance*, Sayers suggested that he should find a playwright who would put together a straightforward historical pageant.[15] They both knew that it was not a serious option.

The opening of *The Just Vengeance* has similarities to the community historical pageants with which Sayers was familiar. In the moment of death an Airman is confronted by a pageant of historical and contemporary figures from his home city, prompting him to ask existential questions about society, war and his place in the scheme of things. The mixture of historical characters and universal types (George Fox, Samuel Johnson, chimney sweep's boy, hunchback, harlot, potter, widow) introduces the theological point that salvation takes place for individuals in historical time within the architecture of eternity. Preoccupied with the apparent senselessness of the conflict in which he has been killed, the Airman is brought to the point of wanting to understand the process of redemption and 'whether the thing makes sense'.[16] Following a central 'mystery play' presenting the narrative of Atonement, the individuals from the pageant return to make a religious commitment in quasi-liturgical form, implicitly inviting the audience members to join them in spirit. Like

[13] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. Susan Dick and Mary S. Millar (Oxford: Blackwell for the Shakespeare Head Press, 2002), 98.
[14] Woolf, *Acts*, 100.
[15] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 191.
[16] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 299.

the devotional aspects of medieval mystery plays, and like Masefield's Canterbury prototype, this is a key element in the process of making real what the drama enacts. For both Sayers and Woolf the contemporary historical pageant urges the audience towards self-examination, particularly significant in a time of war, and for Sayers this is done in a context that further affirms the availability of Christian salvation as *anagnorisis* leads to repentance and renewal.

Mysteries

In the medieval period the word 'pageant' was the name given to individual plays within a mystery cycle and it is not difficult to see why it came to be associated with a theatrical event primarily defined by spectacle: to quote Twycross, 'it is clear that the sheer display of the wagons themselves was an important feature of the theatricality of the whole event.'[17] In describing *The Just Vengeance* as a 'miracle-play' Sayers is placing it in a line of drama which flowered in the fifteenth century and was revived in the twentieth, both in performance and as a model for new writing.[18] Miracle, or mystery, plays were vivid, often demotic ways of performing Bible stories and the lives of saints in the streets of large towns. They fell out of use at the Reformation, when laws were enacted forbidding religious subjects on stage. The first major revival in Britain was directed by E. Martin Browne in York for the 1951 Festival of Britain (Fig. 3, p.38),[19] and performances of mysteries immediately became popular, particularly with amateur groups. They accustomed twentieth century audiences to seeing Christ represented by an actor, paving the way for the abolition of censorship in the commercial theatre.[20] Sayers's use of the mystery form in *The Just Vengeance* precedes its later widespread popularity but may also be partly ascribed to her wish to present the person of Christ without giving offence: she conflates God and Jesus as the Persona Dei. Her main reason for using traditional forms, however, was probably that miracle plays and pageants were community

[17] Meg Twycross, "The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

[18] While attempts have been made to distinguish the terms mystery and miracle plays as having biblical or non-biblical subjects, dogmatic or narrative emphasis, or simply by making a chronological distinction, the fact is that in English there is no consistency in any distinction of usage, either in medieval times or now.

[19] Browne had directed selections from mystery plays as Bell's Diocesan Director of Drama in the 1930s. Kenneth Pickering's 1986 production of the Canterbury Cycle, newly created from medieval sources, was the first mystery play to be performed inside a cathedral. Tony Jasper and Kenneth Pickering, *Jesus Centre Stage* (Godalming: Highland Books, 2010), 28.

[20] See above, p. 39, n.3, and below, pp. 144-5.

enterprises and thus her chosen form reinforced the theological message that community is integral to salvation.

In the fifteenth century the performance of mystery plays on the feast of Corpus Christi was one of the biggest events of the Church's year. In York the procession in which the guilds presented their plays on pageant-wagons was not the only outdoor celebration of the feast: the Confraternity of Corpus Christi organised simultaneous processions which culminated in the Elevation of the host, devotion to which reached its height during the period when the Church was reacting to the growing threat of Lollardy. Pamela King's study of the York Mystery Cycle[21] demonstrates how the liturgical greetings to the Host, which embodies the person of Christ in the Eucharistic processions, are echoed in the greetings to Christ which feature throughout the plays, for instance in the Tilethatchers' play of the Nativity where 'Mary greets her newborn son with an Elevation lyric full of the commonplace and characteristic paradoxes [...] "Hayle my fadir, and hayle my sone".'[22] To complete the blurring of boundaries, the Elevation processions may originally have involved elements of mimesis. Worship, narrative and entertainment were inextricably combined within the plays, which were a community event: as Twycross has said, 'There was no such thing as casual theatregoing: each of these plays was the centrepiece of a special occasion for a close-knit community.'[23] Community was both embodied in and engendered by the Corpus Christi feast and plays.

In her use of medieval models, therefore, Sayers was drawing on an ancient tradition of community drama in which personal devotion had a key place. As we shall see, the response of the audience was an integral part of the dramatic experience for Sayers, as it was for the medieval townspeople. The later chapters of this study will examine how Sayers's plays prompt a response of personal devotion from their audiences, echoing their medieval models in enacting what the plays describe.

Liturgical Participation

In her discussion of the links between the Eucharistic processions and the guild plays, King observes, 'The pageants, which developed in York as an adjunct to the

[21] Pamela M. King, *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006).
[22] King, *The York Cycle*, 23.
[23] Twycross, "Theatricality," 37.

procession before usurping its place in the calendar, [...] are not only influenced by acts of worship, processional, sacramental, anagogic, and ritualised, but they draw on those acts as tools through which meaning is developed, translating them into their own wholly mimetic mode of production.'[24] King makes a theoretical distinction between participation in an act of worship and being the spectator of a drama, but acknowledges that in practice the processional mode resists such a polarity: 'Processions cross the boundaries between ritual and drama, between anagogy and mimesis.'[25] She explores this by quoting Twycross's definition of a tripartite level of engagement: the active participant, the responsive participant and the passive spectator.[26] Twycross's category of 'responsive participant' offers a way of understanding the status of the audience of a play or pageant that invites an active congregational response, and photos of *The Just Vengeance* at Lichfield, taken in conjunction with Sayers's stage directions, suggest that Twycross's category of responsive participant within a processional drama applies to this production (Fig. 9, p. 139). The set is a continuation of the building, the entrances may be through the audience, the sung sections display musical continuity with church music, substantial portions of the sung dialogue are antiphonal in form, and at the *Via Crucis* the audience is encouraged to join the actors in procession. Like the medieval processional mode, Sayers's festival drama is a manifestation of belief in the Church itself as a sacrament. Her view of authorship and reception as a continuum challenges any division between mimetic and anagogic modes.

Sayers argued in *The Mind of the Maker* that being present as audience at any theatrical performance could not be a wholly passive experience. In discussing the effect of the Power, the communicative spirit and the third person of her creative trinity, she points out that we only form a final conception of a play when the Power (the Spirit) enables us to relate the parts to the whole. Watching *Hamlet* for the first time we experience the Energy (the Son) as a sequence in time, wondering how it will all work out. But when the final curtain has gone down we can relate the parts to the whole in a way that amounts to '*more* [Sayers's italics] than the sum total of emotions we experienced while sitting in the stalls.'[27] In this timeless and complete form 'the Word has returned to the Father': the Energy is now seen in relation to the

[24] King, *The York Cycle*, 92.
[25] King, *The York Cycle*, 92.
[26] King, *York Cycle*, 91.
[27] Sayers, *Mind*, 92.

Idea. Watching *Hamlet* for the second time 'we are able [...] to relate the part to the whole and the time-sequence to eternity at every point.'

> It is as though the writer's idea had passed from eternity into time and then back into eternity again – still the same Idea, but charged with a different emphasis of Power derived from our own response. Not only that: if it is a play like *Hamlet*, which has already stimulated powerful responses in the minds of other men, our personal response will be related to a greater unity which includes all those other foci of Power. Every scholar and critic who has written about *Hamlet*, every great actor who has ever played the part, every painter and musician who has found a source of power in *Hamlet*, retransmits that power to the spectator, in accordance with the capacity for response that is in each.[28]

Twycross has pointed out that the audiences in the street for the York mysteries were used to seeing at least twenty-two different actors playing Christ and a comparable number of different approaches to the narrative of salvation. In the Mysteries the relation of parts to the whole was an even more complex process than the assimilation of different performances of *Hamlet*, so that an awareness of the process itself was maintained during the course of an experience of creative participation, comparable with Sayers's analysis of the *Hamlet*-experience.

As we saw in Chapter One, the appropriation that is prompted by a diachronic narrative involves a sense of the otherness of what is being appropriated. What is being appropriated may be a new narrative, such as the Airman's story in *The Just Vengeance*, or it may be the re-appropriation of a familiar story such as the same play's Adam and Eve sequence. In both *The Just Vengeance* and the mystery plays realism is mixed with stylisation, and it is the realism that enables people to identify themselves in the story before moving on to the universal themes. According to Sayers's analysis of *Hamlet*, the audience assimilates the story in a way that involves awareness of the dynamic process itself, so that the appropriation of a new story or different versions of an old becomes a hermeneutical activity. In Chapter One we saw the same relationship between a generalised sacramentalism and the timebound sacramental event. The fact that appropriation of the story is a conscious activity is essential for the audience's progression from hermeneusis to sacramental participation, and this is what distinguishes Sayers's drama from that of

[28] Sayers, *Mind*, 93.

contemporary writers such as Charles Williams who invoked a sacramental world without the focus of a sacramental event within the drama. Sayers made conscious use of the invitation to cross this threshold in all her plays.

Charles Williams

Seed of Adam

An influence on Sayers's drama was Charles Williams, whose nativity *Seed of Adam* was initially published in the journal *Christendom* in September 1937 and produced in London that year. In December 1940, when Sayers was at the height of her row with the BBC as to whether the first drafts of *The Man Born to be King* were too difficult for children, she wrote to Dr James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting:

> Charles Williams seems to be a sort of test case. Educated audiences find his *Seed of Adam* almost incomprehensible; but Fr McLaughlin saw it played to a totally uneducated rural audience, who not only heard it with rapture, but were able to explain quite clearly and sensibly what it was all about.[29]

Densely poetic, telescoping time and place from Eden to the Nativity,[30] *Seed of Adam* is a challenging text to read, but an instinctive understanding of the broad outlines of the play's redemptive theme is conceivable if, for instance, an audience were to have little prior knowledge of the Christian narrative. At the same time, however, the effectiveness of the play's typology depends on a knowledge of what has been conflated. Although Spanos has argued that the telescoping of time is characteristic of a sacramental aesthetic, he accepts that Williams's degree of conflation sacrifices narrative: 'the play is ultimately a drama of ideas, the emphasis falling too heavily on the universal.'[31] Brabazon quotes Sayers's own reservations: 'It is not really drama but a mimed poem.'[32]

Anne Ridler, who edited the play for posthumous publication, takes a more positive view:

---

[29] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 213.

[30] Grevel Lindop has suggested that the conflation of time in Williams's plays was influenced by his experience of seeing people in widely disparate historical costumes walking together in the streets during the St Albans pageant of 1907. Grevel Lindop, *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24.

[31] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 165.

[32] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 238.

> Drama was natural to [Williams] because ideas existed in a state of tension in his mind. Surely the dialectical method is a dramatic method, and if ever a mind worked dialectically, it was his [...] thus, in his plays, the stuff of the drama is always the same: a conflict between good and evil which, almost always, resolves itself into a state where the old terms are no longer true, and what was originally seen as evil is part of perfection. This is very clearly seen in *Seed of Adam*, where the Negress (Hell) becomes midwife at the Incarnation.[33]

Ridler has identified an important respect in which the dramatic medium can be the message: conflation of key concepts makes a theological point about the multi-layered coherence of creation, amounting to a sacramental reading in the sense used by Spanos in which everything points to something beyond.

Seed expresses the complementarity of the two mystical Ways to God that underlies much of Williams's work in the Thirties. He found the Negative or Apophatic Way of the Renunciation of Images in St John of the Cross and the anonymous medieval *Cloud of Unknowing*, and he associated the Affirmation of Images primarily with Dante.[34] Williams's 1943 study of Dante, *The Figure of Beatrice*, is an examination of the Affirmative Way in which Beatrice is a God-bearing image for Dante.[35] In *Seed*, Joseph is a young cavalry officer, and Mary as the object of Joseph's romantic love invokes Dante's 'Beatrician experience'. According to Robert McAfee Brown, a vision of the beloved 'as God sees and intends that human being to be'[36] is a stepping stone to God in the Via Affirmativa, while the Via Negativa, the rejection of images, involves a constant awareness that the beloved is not God.[37] The point is made verbally in *Seed* by the repeated paradox 'This also is Thou; neither is this Thou,'[38] a cryptic formula that Williams developed to express the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of God.[39] Its repetition in *Seed* is a constant reminder to the audience of the play's multi-layered significance: every image both manifests God in itself and

---

[33] Charles Williams, *Seed of Adam and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1948), vii-viii.
[34] Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (London: Longmans, Green, 1939), 58-61. Sebastian Knowles has suggested that Eliot's *Little Gidding* was a response to Williams's analysis. Sebastian D.G. Knowles, *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 119.
[35] Charles Williams, *The Figure of Beatrice* (London: Faber and Faber, 1943).
[36] Robert McAfee Brown, "Charles Williams: Lay Theologian," *Theology Today* X (July 1953): 225.
[37] Williams, *Beatrice*, 8 and passim.
[38] Williams, *Seed*, 12.
[39] For the origins of the expression, see Lindop, *Charles Williams*, 109.

by its limitations points to a God who is infinitely greater. The two great alternative Ways are not ultimately to be separated.

The Third of the Three Kings is also Satan, who with the midwife Hell 'are the things thought of before you, brought/into Eden while men were not,'[40] but like the Skeleton-figure in *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* he is a Satan who is conscious of his part in the scheme of redemption, a figure of 'remedial providence' to use Glen Cavaliero's expression,[41] or 'Necessity' according to Richard Sturch.[42] Cavaliero says, 'Hell is ultimately to be seen as Heaven's complement.'[43] The complementarity of heaven and hell also pervades Sayers's 1939 play *The Devil to Pay,* written soon afterwards, where the ambivalent figures of 'remedial providence' found in *Seed* and *Cranmer* have a counterpart in the figure of Mephistopheles who is finally transformed into a collaborator with God in the scheme of redemption. I suggest that Williams is a possible influence, but we shall see that Sayers's presentation of time is significantly different from the simultaneity of *Seed*. Using the realism that distinguishes her work from that of Williams, Sayers creates parallel scenarios in order to present Faustus with alternative outcomes.

Sayers's work also differs from Williams's in the strength of its audience engagement. Only at the end does *Seed* invite an affective response from the audience in an antiphonal ending suggestive of liturgy:

JOSEPH	Our father Adam is gone in to adore.
THE TSAR	Blessed be he who is the earth's core
THE SULTAN	and splits it all ways with intelligible light.
THE CHORUS	Christ bring us all to the sight
	of the pattern of glory which is only he.
THE ARCHANGEL	Yeshua! [44]

In this restless, spectacular play not characterised by audience involvement the audience is finally invited to become a congregation praising the philosophical God who has been celebrated:

---

[40] Williams, *Seed*, 22.
[41] Glen Cavaliero, "Charles Williams and Twentieth Century Verse Drama," in *Charles Williams: a Celebration*, ed. Brian Horne (Leominster: Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, 1995), 198. 'These figures of remedial providence are Williams's unique contribution to twentieth century drama.'
[42] Necessity is Richard Sturch's name for both the Skeleton in *Cranmer* and the Accuser in *Judgement at Chelmsford*. See "Common Themes Among Inklings," in Horne, *Celebration,* 168.
[43] Cavaliero, "Charles Williams," 200.
[44] Williams, *Seed*, 23.

JOSEPH	Blessed be he whose love is the knowledge of good and its motion the willing of good: blessed be he.
THE CHORUS	Adore, adore: blessed for evermore be the Lord God Sabaoth: blessed be He.[45]

In Cavaliero's words, 'The essentially schematic nature of Williams's imagination fuses Nativity and Redemption in a single piece of symbolism. His work as a literary artist always impels him towards the affirmation of a total spiritual world – 'event-landscape-web' – over-arching or subsuming or enveloping or inter-penetrating this one.'[46] The world of *Seed of Adam* with its telescoped timescale, conflated characters and emphasis on a web of exchange, substitution and co-inherence is in these respects a prototype for *The Just Vengeance*, but we shall see that in the Airman's story Sayers provides from the beginning a framework of contemporary narrative with which her audience members can immediately identify themselves.

Spanos's study of the verse dramatists is based on the mid-century view that the Incarnation creates an aesthetic principle in which the present contains the past.[47] The effect of this in *Seed of Adam* is to make visible the doctrine that a single event in time is something whose consequences can remain real and immediate: to quote Sayers's phrase at the end of *The Just Vengeance*, 'where the endless Now is one with the moment's measure.'[48] I shall suggest, however, that Sayers goes beyond the static and hieratic conflation which makes much of Williams's work paradigmatic of Spanos's definition of a sacramental aesthetic and, particularly in the post-war plays, instantiates an approach in which sacramentality is a dynamic and participative process.

Williams's Theology of Performance

Bradley M. Wells's study of Williams's 'unique incarnational performance theology'[49] argues that the development of religious drama between the wars was 'a means to bridge the supposed gulf between verse and the more prosaic modern

[45] Williams, *Seed*, 24.
[46] Cavaliero, "Charles Williams," 200.
[47] Spanos, *Verse Drama*, 25.
[48] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 351.
[49] Bradley M. Wells, "Co-inhered Flesh: Incarnational Performance Theology in the Plays of Charles Williams" (PhD thesis in the Department of English, The University of Sydney, 2014), 3.

experience, the divine and the secular, the supernatural and natural',[50] and Wells examines this in the light of Williams's theology of the Incarnation. The belief in a generalised sacramentality in which the created world is penetrated by the divine was common to the mid-century verse dramatists, and Williams' theology of performance may in this respect not have been unique, but in drawing attention to liturgical and sacramental elements in Williams's early drama, Wells's study is suggestive of ways in which Sayers's development of a sacramental mode may have been influenced by Williams.

Williams's trilogy of plays written for performance by and for his colleagues at Amen House, the London arm of Oxford University Press, in the 1920s, allegorises the process of writing and publication in a reflection of the Rosicrucian rites and Arthurian themes that Williams was exploring at the time.[51] *The Masque of the Manuscript* (1927) is the story of the manuscript's death in order to be reborn as a book, and Williams's colleagues took part as actors in a performance attended by their non-acting colleagues, an example of ostension that strikingly collapses the divide between actors and audience as the performers dramatise their work in the presence of their co-workers in the real world. In *The Masque of Perusal* (1929), according to Wells, Williams 'invokes the experience of the co-inhered truth of the one universal and eternal City that Amen House embodies.'[52] Co-inherence was the basis of a theology of exchange that Sayers later acknowledged as an influence on *The Just Vengeance*, and the symbolism of Amen House as the Eternal City is not unlike that play's concept of the Church itself as a sacrament, but with the Airman's narrative Sayers once again relocates Williams's theories in lived experience. Williams's early plays were written for audiences of intellectuals; with the public commission of *Judgement at Chelmsford* he moved into a more realistic and episodic mode that owes a good deal to Eliot's *The Rock* and, I suggest, something to Sayers herself.

As we saw in Chapter One (p. 7), Gerald Weales's 1961 survey of religious drama in the first half of the twentieth century unfavourably compares Sayers's work with that of Charles Williams.[53] Brabazon is another commentator who regards Sayers's verse

[50] Wells, "Co-inhered Flesh," 3.
[51] Lindop, *Third Inkling*, 135.
[52] Wells, "Co-inhered Flesh," 36.
[53] Weales, *Modern English Drama*, 142-79.

as derivative, and his opinion of *The Just Vengeance* is that 'she has borrowed [Williams's] verse rhythms and even his diction.'[54] Sayers undoubtedly owes a good deal to Williams, but the influence worked both ways. Sayers herself used the term 'echoes' in addressing the issue of literary influence, evidencing the work of Eliot and Joyce in which allusions to other writers are made in homage rather than imitation and have the effect of enriching both their old and new contexts.[55] The reworking of other writers' material can be seen as not only an homage but also a paradigm of God's creative generativity. I shall argue that in fact Sayers has her own distinctive poetic voice and that her dramatic method has a robustness and clarity which is lacking in Williams's plays: Williams's characters remain representative embodiments of concepts whereas Sayers creates believable characters in a precisely realised context who at the same time retain a representative function. To quote Spanos, 'Miss Sayers' aesthetic is sacramental and *The Zeal of Thy House* multivocal, a dramatisation at once of the human and divine. In fact, it is her acknowledgment of [...] the concrete world of man that renders the image of the action, if not the play as a whole, more truly sacramental than Williams' *Cranmer of Canterbury* and even Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*.'[56] Unlike Williams, Sayers signposts her changes of register so that the telescoping of time and the conflating of characters are not entirely left for the audience to disentangle. As I have suggested above, she uses realism to invite appropriation of the narrative and of the transformative sacramental event whose effects extend beyond the horizon of the play's ending, a process implicit in some of Williams's drama but present in Sayers's work in a much more developed form.

Detection: Realism and Moral Choice

We have seen above how Sayers's playwriting was influenced by three different strands of drama: the contemporary historical pageant, the medieval mystery and the contemporary verse drama of Charles Williams. All these three modes display a high level of stylisation and symbolism, pointing to non-literal significance, and I have suggested that Sayers and her contemporaries believed that all creative activity including drama tapped into a generalised sacramentalism in which the whole created world, and the human creative act in particular, was penetrated by and itself reflected the divine. I have further suggested that for Sayers drama had the potentiality for a

[54] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 238.
[55] Sayers, *Mind*, 96.
[56] Spanos, *Sacramental Aesthetic*, 131.

more focused sacramentalism which operated in two ways: first, the presence of an audience could make a theatrical performance itself reflect the nature of a Church sacrament as the audience received the play, processed it and themselves contributed to the identity and uniqueness of the total experience by the nature of their response. Secondly, Sayers used the sacraments of the Church as events within the drama: each of her festival plays has a traditional *anagnorisis* which Sayers identifies with the self-examination of the Church's sacrament of penance. In the first two plays, this results in the protagonist's repentance and promised restitution within a quasi-liturgical scenario; in *The Just Vengeance* there is a quasi-Eucharistic ending in which the Persona invites the actors to 'eat My flesh and blood/And make My substance and My self your own,'[57] and at the end of *The Emperor Constantine* the central character makes the personal commitment of a deathbed baptism enacted on stage. In the later chapters of this study I shall suggest that this increasingly focused sacramentalism evidences a developing commitment to the hermeneutical properties of drama and that Sayers believed her audiences would appropriate and process what they had experienced in such a way as to generate continuing responses to the dogmas and creeds of Christianity.

The story of how Sayers went about this task is bound up with her commitment to realism as the dominant mode of her drama, and this realism is what separates her work from that of the mainstream verse dramatists of the period: Masefield, Eliot and Williams in the twenties and thirties, with Fry, Nicholson and Ridler taking up the tradition after the War. As a detective novelist Sayers had engaged her readers with precisely imagined and vividly described locations and characters. What may not be obvious to the casual reader is that the realism of the novels is the medium for theological symbolism and moral questioning. Sayers always professed herself to be astonished when people failed to recognise the essential continuity between her novels and plays, and in this section I shall examine the theological content of the detective novels and the way it prefigures some of the major themes of the plays.

The novel *The Nine Tailors* (1934) is considered by many to be Sayers's best: it is probably also the one that displays the most overt theological content. The book opens on New Year's Eve when Wimsey's car takes a nosedive into a ditch in a snowbound Fenland landscape. The opening description vividly creates a

[57] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 329.

prelapsarian world in which the sound of a church bell chiming the first quarter is the only indicator of direction for the travellers:

> Right and left, before and behind, the fen lay shrouded. It was past four o'clock and New Year's Eve; the snow that had fallen all day gave back a glimmering greyness to a sky like lead [...] the sound of a church clock, muffled by the snow, came borne upon the wind; it chimed the first quarter. 'Thank God!' said Wimsey. 'Where there is a church, there is civilization.'[58]

In a 'shrouded' landscape the new year, the new hour, and the new story are just beginning, and the Church provides a direction. The realism of the description creates a context of expectation that enables the reader to engage with the story, and the symbolism of the narrative points the way to an interpretative process that will continue throughout the book. When a man is tied up in the church belfry and is unintentionally killed by the noise of an all-night peal on the bells, performed by a group of ringers that includes both the rector and Wimsey himself, the result is a malaise or imbalance within the community as greed, love, fear and revenge take their toll. The bellringers were instruments of the original killing and share an inescapable community of guilt in this microcosm of fallen human society. Fenchurch St. Paul is a Garden of Eden where a sin has to be expiated, and the church where the residents take refuge as the floodwaters rise is explicitly referred to as an Ark. Expiation is followed by sacramental regeneration: the floodwaters are also the waters of baptism, underlined by the fact that a baby is born and baptised during the villagers' incarceration in the church. Unlike the grim endings of Sayers's other detective novels, in which the murderer meets a lonely death and there is little sense of renewal, in *The Nine Tailors* regeneration happens within the whole community. Salvation within the Christian community continued to be a central theme when Sayers turned her hand to drama.

Moral Responsibility and Individual Choice

An aspect of Sayers's novels that carries on into her plays is that characters are made to take full responsibility for their actions. The belief that humans are free agents was Sayers's personal conviction, but in a traditional detective novel it is essential for the reader's satisfaction that the criminal should act freely. All Sayers's major drama concerns choices made on the human journey towards salvation; her apologetics are

[58] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Nine Tailors* (London: New English Library, 1979 (1934)), 8.

about how to live well; and her final work was a translation of the 'drama of the soul's choice',[59] Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Sayers was impatient of what she saw as the deterministic tendencies of psychology and the social sciences with their emphasis on unconscious motivation, and she focused rather on the processes by which a free agent makes a conscious choice in spite of restrictions. An illustration may be made by comparing two widely different pieces written within a space of two years. *Even the Parrot* (1944)[60] is a children's book intended to guide young readers towards appropriate behaviour and attitudes during wartime, written as a Victorian pastiche so that the style amuses while the content instructs. *The Just Vengeance* (1946) was Sayers's most ambitious dramatic undertaking, written for the 900th anniversary of Lichfield cathedral, in which an Airman in the moment of death returns to his native city of Lichfield to face judgment before God. In both works the subject is under authority and there are therefore constraints on choice, in the children's case the authority of parents, in the Airman's the discipline of the war machine. Both subjects might protest that they are not free agents, but in both fictions it is clear that the autonomous individual has genuine choices.

Like most twentieth century fiction writers Sayers absorbed the insights of Freudianism and used them, but she was aware that they could be a moral crutch, excusing a criminal or sinner on the grounds of diminished responsibility. Sayers and her Christian contemporaries frequently bracketed Freudianism with what they regarded as modern pseudo-sciences such as sociology; by contrast, developments in pure sciences such as physics could be integrated into a view that the world was created by God. The first of C.S. Lewis's 1942 *Screwtape Letters*, a work Sayers admired, makes the point clearly. The advice of the senior devil to the junior is to steer the potential sinner towards economics and sociology and away from 'the real sciences' which 'will positively encourage him to think about realities he can't touch and see. There have been sad cases among the modern physicists.'[61] Science that concerned itself with the nature of the God-given material world was considered no threat to religion. Sciences of the mind and society, on the other hand, offered explanations for human behaviour which might radically affect perceptions of the nature of human responsibility.

---

[59] Sayers, *Hell*, 11.
[60] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Even the Parrot: Exemplary Conversations for Enlightened Children* (London: Methuen, 1944).
[61] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Fontana, 1968 (1942)), 14.

Integral to the centrality of moral choice in Sayers's fiction is the concept of assent to sin. The moment of assent to sin was a key theme for Sayers and her contemporaries, perhaps not surprisingly in view of what was happening in Germany with the initial consent of the electorate. In his novel *Descent into Hell* (1937) Charles Williams anatomised the process of assent to evil in the character of Lawrence Wentworth, and C.S. Lewis described in *That Hideous Strength* (1945) a comparable process in his protagonist Mark Studdock: 'the moment of his consent almost escaped his notice; certainly, there was no struggle, no sense of turning a corner.'[62] In the lecture "The City of Dis" Sayers asked: 'How often does a man know the precise moment when his will consented to sin? By what obscure interior resolution did the thought "I wish my brother were dead" give place to the settled intention: "I mean to murder him"?'[63] Long before she read Dante with serious attention, Sayers made use of the concept of the 'threshold of assent' (*Purgatory* 18.63) in the moral structure of her fiction. In the discussion below we shall see how Sayers's epistolary detective novel *The Documents in the Case* (1930) demonstrates the process whereby a suggestible young man is manoeuvred into murder by his lover. He hangs: for Sayers to understand all is not to forgive all.

Wimsey as an Agent of Justice

Among the 'big four' women detective novelists of the inter-war years (Allingham, Christie, Marsh and Sayers) it is Sayers who is credited with refocusing the genre so that the characters are as interesting as the crime, and central to that achievement is the fact that, while the realism of her portrayal of Wimsey is sometimes called into question, her murderers are portrayed with considerable complexity. This realism works in tandem with the conventions of the genre to reinforce Sayers's emphasis on individual responsibility: it is essential for the reader's enjoyment that the criminal should consciously engage in a battle of wits with the sleuth, and the moral corollary of this is that the criminal is invested with choice, responsibility and guilt.

Wimsey's readiness to question his own role in bringing murderers to justice is a feature of Sayers's realism and is also used to reinforce the moral sanction against murder. At this period murder incurred the death penalty, but detective novels

[62] C.S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength* (London: Pan Books, 1983 (1945)), 130.
[63] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Introductory Papers on Dante* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 133.

frequently sidestepped the fact of execution. In her final Wimsey novel, *Busman's Honeymoon*, Sayers follows the criminal investigation through to its grim conclusion on the gallows: Wimsey's distress at Crutchley's execution, an addition to the West End play from which the novel was developed, gives the novel a sombre coda. It would be a mistake to assume, however, that the thrust of the conclusion is to question the judicial system. Attitudes to the criminal are channelled through the forensic narrative and in none of the novels is the reader encouraged to rebel against either the genre or the law. Wimsey's feeling for those he brings to justice is linked to the realism of their portrayal and has an educative function: their humanity means they are people the reader might know or be, with the implication that their wrongdoing is within the capacity of ordinary people. The reader appropriates the narrative and with it a clear moral choice.

In several of the novels Wimsey asks himself the utilitarian question of whether the sum of suffering would in practice have been less if he had kept out of it. The answer, whether implied or stated, is always that to kill is morally wrong, a prohibition supported by civilised society as well as by religious belief. Sayers uses the principle to focus individual guilt and responsibility: if the wrongness of murder is indisputable, there is no doubt that the murderer is consciously choosing a known evil. The novel *Unnatural Death* sets up a test case for whether murder can ever be condoned. The victim is an intestate old lady only a few months from death who intends her niece to inherit her estate; the niece commits murder to make sure that she inherits before the introduction of legislation which might call the inheritance into question. No-one else is hurt and the killing ensures that the dying woman's wishes are carried out. The one thing that makes this killing morally wrong is the essential wrongness of killing. Wimsey's investigation, however, frightens the killer into two more murders. Although not professing to be a Christian, Wimsey asks a priest if it would have been better not to have meddled, and the answer is:

> It is bad for a human being to get to feel that he has any right whatever to dispose of another person's life to his own advantage. It leads him on to think himself above all laws – Society is never safe from the man who has deliberately committed murder with impunity.[64]

[64] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1941 (1927)), 229-30.

Fr Tredgold's analysis of the roots of murder has something in common with the theme of Chesterton's famous short story, "The Hammer of God", which Sayers, who admired Chesterton, must have known.[65] The person with the illusion of being God becomes a major theme of Sayers's drama in the 1930s. In his role as agent of justice Wimsey is not so much wielding the sword of retribution as reminding humanity of its creaturely limitations.

The Murderer as God in *The Documents in the Case*

The novel in which the murderer's psychology is most directly examined is the one in which Wimsey does not appear: *The Documents in the Case*. The story is told in epistolary form, mainly in letters to his fiancée by the writer John Munting, who observes the events that prompt his friend, the artist Harwood Lathom, to murder. Munting shares Wimsey's reluctance to be an agent of justice but when a scientific experiment proves beyond doubt that murder rather than accidental death is in question, he rejects the ties of friendship for the demands of law and morality. Proof of murder can only be obtained if it is possible to demonstrate that the poison used was man-made rather than naturally occurring. When it emerges that there is a scientific way of distinguishing between synthetic and naturally-occurring substances by passing a beam of light through them, Sayers uses the single revelatory beam of light in a dark laboratory to full dramatic, and theological, effect by making the light a metaphor for an essential difference at the heart of the God-created universe:

> Then, when the thing seems absolutely hopeless [...] comes the ray of light [....], the hand of God, science, life, truth – whatever you like to call it, waiting from the dawn of Creation [...] ready, after millions of centuries, to catch the murderer out.[66]

Sayers does not labour the point by exposition in the novel but consciously uses the dramatic method to let it speak for itself:

> If only we can get this just exactly right, I do think the situation will be extremely powerful, and 'God's revenge against murder' very, very striking.[67]

---

[65] *The Selected Works of G.K. Chesterton* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008), 466-78.

[66] Sayers, *Letters One*, 294. Letter to her scientific adviser 'Robert Eustace' (Dr Eustace Barton), who had already collaborated with the novelist and thriller-writer L.T. Meade.

[67] Sayers, *Letters One*, 295.

For Sayers, the fact that the murderer is brought to book by the use of synthetic poison has a theological significance, reinforcing a belief that evil is not inherent in creation but is a human construct. According to the privation theory of evil discussed in *The Mind of the Maker* and explored in Sayers's play on the Faust theme, *The Devil to Pay*, God creates only the potentiality for evil, not the evil itself, which is made into an active force by the human will (see Chapter Four). Psychologically speaking, the two different forms of poison, symbolising death-by-accident and death-by-design, reinforce a belief that movement over the threshold of assent to evil is a deliberate choice, and that this choice involves a rejection of God. All Sayers's morally compromised characters set themselves up in opposition to God in one way or another: Lathom's use of the synthetic poison strikingly symbolises this.

To return to the four points uniting literary and theological perspectives in Sayers's plays, *The Documents* anticipates the plays by inviting the reader to appropriate the story through its realism, and to process its themes through the symbolism that initiates a hermeneutical process. The use of the epistolary form is itself a dramatic method in which there is no authorial intervention: the theatricality of the scene described above and the symbolism of the different kinds of poison speak for themselves without any comment other than that mediated by the characters. When she started writing plays, Sayers was repeatedly to use the technique of creating a situation in which symbolism reinforces the audience's awareness of the issues. We have seen this at work in *The Nine Tailors*, and *The Documents* is an even more developed example of dramatic method.

Sayers's work as a detective novelist, then, sets the stage for her work as a playwright both morally, theologically and aesthetically. The individual bears full responsibility for his or her wrongdoing, and could have chosen to do otherwise. This applies across all Sayers's writing and will tie in with her work on the privation theory of evil in *The Mind of the Maker* and her dramatic protagonists Faustus and Judas. Murder is an irreversible crime and as such is paradigmatic of a clear difference between right and wrong: only God has legitimate power over life and death and the murderer frequently thinks he or she is God. In varying degrees, failure to acknowledge creaturely dependence is the fault of all Sayers's dramatic protagonists. Although murder can not be reversed, however, sin can be redeemed by a creative act, and an early pointer to how this can happen comes in the novel *The*

Nine Tailors, where the regenerative flood waters symbolise the sacrament of baptism.

Sayers's Aesthetics

'Right in art is right in practice': Art as Critique

The execution of Harwood Lathom is the death not only of a potentially decent human being who could have made a different choice, but also the death of a good artist. Although Lathom sets himself up in opposition to God in everyday life, Sayers makes the important point that in his art he does not play God: when he paints a portrait of his lover, Margaret Harrison, Munting's comment is: 'It's really first rate. And revealing, my God! only Mrs H. doesn't see that, and I don't think Lathom realises it either.'[68] Margaret Harrison, who is complicit in the murder, escapes justice but is unable to escape the eye of the artist. This theme also appears in the short story "The Unsolved Puzzle of the Man with No Face": the police close the case when their suspect commits suicide, but Wimsey has identified the true murderer as an artist whose portrait of the victim expresses his hatred of the subject.[69] The idea that an artist of integrity always 'serves the work' is embodied in *The Zeal of Thy House*; the corollary that by its very nature art can be a catalyst of truth is expressed in *Busman's Honeymoon*, both the play and the novel, where Wimsey's investigative approach is endorsed by Harriet as a detective novelist, leading Wimsey to remark, 'If it's right in art it's right in practice.'[70]

The implication that the creative process can provide a key to understanding the real world is not laboured in Sayers's fiction, but a few years later it came to dominate her apologetics, when she transferred the axiom 'Right in art is right in practice' into a theological context and applied it to the whole of Catholic dogma. We have seen in Chapter One that Sayers thought theology and drama could critique each other. In dramatising the gospel stories in her twelve-part radio life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers was aware that both the translator and the dramatist inevitably interpose filters between the finished creation and the original material, but she was convinced that theology was inherently dramatic and would speak for itself through

---

[68] Sayers, *Documents*, 50.

[69] Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Unsolved Puzzle of the Man with No Face," in *Lord Peter Views the Body* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962 (1928)), 218-47.

[70] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Love All*, with *Busman's Honeymoon* by Dorothy L. Sayers and Muriel St Clare Byrne, ed. Alzina Stone Dale (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1984), 43.

layers of interpretation, writing to Fr Kelly: 'The dogma of the Incarnation is the most dramatic thing about Christianity [...] since it is not the playwright's business to argue but to present, the only thing one can do is to put it on the stage […] and let it speak for itself.'[71] In the Introduction to *The Man Born to be King* she made an explicit link between her explorations of this theme through both fiction and drama.

> As I once made a character say in another context: 'Right in art is right in practice'; and I can only affirm that at no point have I yet found artistic truth and theological truth at variance.[72]

As in *The Documents in the Case* and *Busman's Honeymoon*, the creative process is a test of its subject matter. This conviction was of central importance when Sayers found herself defending *The Man Born to be King* against the fears of the religious Establishment.

Sayers's conviction that art itself has a hermeneutical property is a dominant link between her work in all genres and derives from her belief that the process of human creation mirrors God's work in his larger creation. The link between human and divine creation is the subject of *The Mind of the Maker* (1941), defining the human creative process in terms of the controlling Idea, the Energy that turns the Idea into a work of art, and the Power that communicates it, three inextricable but distinct processes analogous with God's Trinitarian work in creation as Father, Son and Spirit, and comparable with the Thomist aesthetic trio of *integritas*, *consonantia*, *claritas* explored by Maritain.[73] As we saw above in the example from *Hamlet*, Sayers's Trinitarian dynamic of Idea, Energy and Power are in constant and equal movement in relation to each other, with the Power returning the transformed Energy back to the Idea when it has been processed in the receptive soul: '[...] creative criticism is the Spirit's continual response to its own creation.'[74] In *Mind* she emphasizes that each element in the dynamic process of creation has to play an equal part, exploring the limitations of work that is unbalanced under the title "Scalene Trinities". The 'huge cloudy cosmogonies' (121) of Blake are father-ridden; the 'verbal and syllabic association' (122) of James Joyce is son-ridden; the Method

---

[71] Sayers, *Letters 2*, 43.
[72] Sayers, *Man Born*, 19.
[73] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 20.
[74] Sayers, *Mind*, 143. Quotations from *The Mind of the Maker* in the rest of this chapter will be given in the text.

actor who lives in a role too completely may be said to be ghost-ridden. A dynamic balance within the Trinitarian analogy is thus the key to Sayers's belief that art critiques its subject matter. The essence of the Ghost's persona is the power to know good from evil in artistic terms: it is through the dynamic flow of a Trinitarian structure that art becomes a hermeneutic force.

Sayers took this understanding further in an emphasis on the completion of the circle through the artist's reading of his or her own work, which in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" includes God's reading of creation: 'the Father [...] is known only to himself by beholding his image in his Son.'[75] Michael Hampel has pointed out that her theory was similar to that of Lascelles Abercrombie in *The Theory of Poetry* (1924), which she had not read before writing *Mind*. Hampel quotes an unpublished letter of 1941 in which Sayers says she is glad that she did not read Abercrombie's book earlier, as 'I should have suspected myself of being influenced by what he said – especially about the return of the idea through the Son to the God – almost identical with mine in other words.' Hampel comments, 'Abercrombie treats the writing of a poem […] as a means by which the poet continues to experience the event.'[76]

Sayers is careful to emphasize in *Mind* that the Trinitarian analogy applies to creativity and in itself has no moral dimension. There is, however, an intersection with the moral sphere when art critiques theology and the concept of integrity is applied to the whole range of human activity, and in practice Sayers increasingly explored the link between morality and aesthetics in her drama and prose writings. She was undoubtedly influenced by Maritain's discussion of Art and Prudence,[77] and another contemporary influence on her thinking in this area is the moral philosopher John Macmurray's 1932 work *Freedom in the Modern World*,[78] which is listed first in the bibliography appended to Sayers's wartime essay *Begin Here* (1940).[79] For Macmurray, personal authenticity or integrity is at the heart of morality and he argues for the freedom to realise this integrity in action: 'Anything is free when it realizes its own proper nature spontaneously in its behaviour.'[80] The term 'proper

[75] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[76] Hampel, "Creative Mind," 78.
[77] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 11-16.
[78] John Macmurray, *Freedom in the Modern World* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1968).
[79] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Begin Here* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), 157.
[80] Macmurray, *Freedom*, 126.

nature' is used by Sayers throughout *The Mind of the Maker*, and like Macmurray she applies it to both people and their creations.

For Sayers, as we saw in Chapter One, the task of achieving integrity means allowing the art to shape its subject matter rather than imposing external constraints, and her starting point is the artist's relation to his or her medium: 'The business of the creator is not to escape from his material medium or to bully it, but to serve it; but to serve it he must love it. This is true, not only of all literary art but of all creative art' (53). If the author does not permit characters 'to develop in conformity with their proper nature, they will cease to be true and living creatures' (53). This is the explanation of what authors mean when they say that a character has a life of its own. Although she ridicules writers who say, 'I don't really invent the plot, you know – I just let the characters come into my mind and let them take charge of it,' she adds, 'Nevertheless, the free will of a genuinely created character has a certain reality, which the writer will defy at his peril' (53-4). A pre-determined plot may require actions which have become implausible because of the way a character has developed, for example *The Taming of the Shrew*: 'Nothing will persuade us that characters like those would really subdue themselves to a plot like that' (55). On the other hand, the constraints of art provide opportunities for creatively serving the work.

Macmurray explicitly links artistic freedom with moral freedom in describing a human situation in which constraint provides an opportunity for creativity:

> If I said that we are all in our proper nature artists, you would be inclined to laugh, I imagine, though I think that it would be a true statement. [...] Think of two intimate friends on holiday together and completely at home with one another [...] They know each other and love each other [...] They make plans together and co-operate and share their enjoyments and their thoughts. So they are free – they think freely and feel freely and act freely – in one another's company [...] Only when we live in this way can we be free; for only then do we express our own nature in action. And this freedom is moral freedom.[81]

A comparable moral freedom is described by Charles Williams: 'The only freedom is to choose obedience […] As when we do not interrupt our friends' part in the

[81] Macmurray, *Freedom*, 124.

conversation.'[82] Macmurray does not pursue the point equating the artist's love for the work with the human imperative to act for others, but it anticipates Sayers's use of the aesthetic paradigm in which the free will of a character to develop in accordance with its nature as established by the author is something which is not determinism but which unites the Idea with the Energy.

> I can only state, as matter [sic] of experience, that if the characters and the situation are rightly conceived together, as integral parts of the same unity, then there will be no need to force them to the right solution of that situation. If each is allowed to develop in conformity with its proper nature, they will arrive of their own accord at a point of unity, which will be the same unity that pre-existed in the original idea. In language to which we are accustomed in other connections, neither predestination nor free will is everything, but, if the will acts freely in accordance with its true nature, it achieves by grace and not by judgment the eternal will of its maker, though possibly by a process unlike, and longer than, that which might have been imposed on it by force (60).

Here we have the vital intersection between art and life, where Sayers's experience as an artist validates a theology of grace against law and judgment. God gives his creation free will: it is possible for believers to argue that divine foreknowledge involves a kind of predestination and for the rationalist to believe that scientific investigation will eventually act as a complete predictor. But the paradigm from art suggests that with God's grace acting in tandem with their own efforts people can make good choices, those which coincide with the direction of God's creation, and that this constitutes free will. The fact that humans so manifestly fail to do this much of the time serves only to reinforce a belief that they are free to choose. The commitment to human free will that we have seen displayed in the novels is shown through Sayers's Trinitarian analogy as being theologically compatible with God as all-encompassing creator.

In line with contemporary thinkers such as Maritain and Macmurray, Sayers regarded the aesthetic and the moral as being linked as manifestations of the love that liberates its object: the freedom of imagined characters to pursue a course of action consistent with their created nature is a paradigm for understanding the freedom of the creature within God's creation. Evil, whether it takes the form of artistic

[82] Charles Williams, *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, ed. Anne Ridler (Berkeley, CA: The Apocryphile Press, 2007 (1958)), 115.

weakness or of bad moral choices, is the result of imbalance in the component parts of the creative trinity, and when the balance is compromised the result is a work of art or person whose integrity is impaired or imperilled. Sayers explicitly applies the aesthetic paradigm of imagined characters' free will to the question of moral choice in the modern world:

> If the common man asks the artist for help in producing moral judgments or practical solutions, the only answer he can get is something like this: You must learn to handle practical situations as I handle the material of my book: you must take them and use them to *make a new thing* (155).

For Sayers, the newness of an artistic creation is emblematic of the freedom God gives his creatures, and in the moral sphere the answer to evil is therefore to transform it by making it new. If evil is an imbalance or distortion, its redemption involves getting back in touch with the original Idea. But that does not involve pretending that the evil never happened: 'We must not [...] try to behave as if the Fall had never occurred nor yet say that the Fall was a good thing in itself. But we may redeem the Fall by a creative act' (86). The story of Sayers's work in drama from the mid-thirties is the story of different ways in which the Fall may be redeemed with a creative act.

Literary Influence

In this chapter we have seen that Sayers's creations in both fiction and drama demonstrate a wide range of influences, all of which she has refashioned to 'make a new thing'. A major source of material for Sayers's work that has not yet been discussed is her wide reading in literature. In the Introduction to *The Just Vengeance* Sayers says that readers will recognise echoes of the apostles and saints, Williams and Eliot, and direct quotations from Dante. She is at pains to establish that, in terms of both content and style, echoes of other writers are not out of place, and she wants such echoes to be recognised as part of a tradition, following contemporary Modernist writers such as Eliot: 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists.' [83]

[83] T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 38.

Chapter VIII of *The Mind of the Maker*, entitled "Pentecost", is a discussion of the way a text communicates with the reader. The Holy Spirit seen as the Power to communicate is the third person of Sayers's creative trinity, without which the Idea and its incarnation, the Energy, could find no resonance in humankind, and we have seen that the flow of communication always goes both ways. In the words of the quotation from Wordsworth which is one of the chapter's epigraphs, Power 'Doth like an agent of the one great Mind/Create, creator and receiver both' (87). The process of creation as a traffic between creator and created is reminiscent of Coleridge's 'Oh lady! We receive but what we give'[84] and his description in the *Biographia Literaria* of 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking',[85] echoed in Sayers's thoughts, quoted above, on the similarity of her ideas to Abercrombie's. Coleridge's theory of the primary and secondary imagination not only illuminates Sayers's dynamic model of the Trinity as paradigmatic of the human creative process, but also addresses the question of whether human creativity is a continuation or analogy of God's creativity:

> The IMAGINATION, then, I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind* of its agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create.[86]

The secondary imagination's mode of operation, represented as a dissolution followed by re-creation, maintains a continuity of agency with the activity of the primary imagination but a distinct outcome, comparable with Sayers's assertion that 'once the Idea has entered into other minds, it will tend to reincarnate itself there with ever-increasing Energy and ever-increasing power'(88).

The example of *Hamlet* as a nexus of accumulated meaning leads Sayers into an analysis of verbal association, starting with a sentence from *The Nine Tailors* describing the angel roof in a church where Wimsey is conducting an investigation:

---

[84] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode," *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 114.
[85] S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* vol. 1, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907), 86.
[86] Coleridge, *Biographia* 1, 202.

‘[...] incredibly aloof, flinging back the light in a dusky shimmer of bright hair and gilded outspread wings, soared the ranked angels, cherubim and seraphim, choir over choir, from corbel and hammer-beam floating face to face uplifted’ (95). Sayers identifies the influences she considers contributed to her choice of words with quotations from the Bible, Milton, Keats, Browning, Tennyson, a half-remembered snippet of doggerel, Eliot and Donne. Anticipating the objection that ‘these great streams of power have been much diminished by pouring through my narrow channel’ she asserts that ‘what is important, and not always understood in these days, is that a reminiscent passage of this kind is intended to recall to the reader all the associated passages, and so put him in touch with the sources of power behind and beyond the writer’ (96). The demand for originality would not have been understood in earlier times, and contemporary writers such as Eliot use a web of quotations and adaptations chosen for their associative value: ‘The criterion is, not whether the associations are called up, but whether the spirits invoked by this kind of verbal incantation are charged with personal power by the magician who speeds them about their new business’ (96). This is the answer to people who complain that a commentator is reading into a piece of writing more than the author ‘meant’ [Sayers’s quotation marks].

The description in question is one of a number of atmospheric set-pieces in *The Nine Tailors*, and it is arguable that these passages are among the features which make this the most generally acclaimed of her detective stories. In answer to those who find her passages of fine writing self-indulgent, we may also note that this example has an important function within the story of detection: it draws the reader’s attention to the place where the stolen emeralds are hidden. When Sayers is apparently enjoying herself in a purple passage she may also be slyly challenging the reader’s forensic skills. We shall see that in the plays, and particularly in *The Just Vengeance* (p. 173 below), she again uses genre itself in the creation of meaning.

Umberto Eco has analysed the creative processes at work in his bestselling detective novel *The Name of the Rose* in a way comparable with Sayers’s remarks in Chapter VIII. His conclusions go further than Sayers’s and can be said to constitute an exposition of the theory of intertextuality, but Sayers probably would not have dissented on any important point. ‘A narrator should not provide interpretations of his work; otherwise he would not have written a novel, which is a machine for

generating interpretations.'[87] This may be compared with Sayers's words in Chapter IV of *The Mind of the Maker*: 'To persist in asking, as so many of us do, "What did you mean by this book?" is to invite bafflement: the book itself is what the writer means' (45). Eco says that 'Nothing is of greater consolation to the author of a novel than the discovery of readings he had not conceived but which are then prompted by his readers,' adding, 'I am not saying that the author may not find a discovered reading perverse; but even if he does, he must remain silent, allow others to challenge it, text in hand.'[88] This approach to fiction is in contrast with his theoretical works where Eco's judicial attitude towards reviewers was: 'Have they or have they not understood what I meant?'[89] The chapter from which these quotations are taken concludes with the important words: 'The author should die once he has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text.'[90] For Eco the meaning of fiction finally depends on the reader. He has written extensively on 'constructing the reader' and in the chapter with this title in *Reflections* he says:

> When a work is finished, a dialogue is established between the text and its readers (the author is excluded). While a work is in progress, the dialogue is double: there is the dialogue between that text and all other previously written texts (books are made only from other books and around other books), and there is the dialogue between the author and his model reader.[91]

For Sayers the completed book is the reader's possession but the author remains implicitly in the picture as the originator of meaning. In the Postscript to *Mind* she writes: 'When [the artist] says, "This is my top-hat, my bathroom, my motor-car," he means merely that he possesses these things; but when he says, "this is my work", he means that, no matter who now possesses it, he made it' (180). In this respect she remains within the Modernist assumptions of her own time.

Conclusion

Sayers believed that a good artist has an inner compulsion to serve the 'good of the work', following Maritain: '[...] in the actual production of the work the virtue of art has only one object, the good of the work to be done; to make matter resplendent

---

[87] Umberto Eco, *Reflections on* The Name of the Rose, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985), 2.
[88] Eco, *Reflections*, 3.
[89] Eco, *Reflections*, 3.
[90] Eco, *Reflections*, 7.
[91] Eco, *Reflections*, 47.

with beauty, to create a thing in accordance with the laws of its being, independently of anything else.'[92] Once a work of art has been conceived it has its own integrity or essential character which the artist, its creator, has to respect. This can create problems for a writer who has a pre-determined plot to follow, but it is characteristic of Sayers to take an authorial problem of this kind and explore it within the fiction: in *The Documents in the Case* Lathom's talent gives his paintings an integrity that is lacking in his personal life, a motif that Sayers returned to, with a different outcome, in *Zeal*. In this respect her method of working can be compared with the process described in Umberto Eco's book *Reflections on* The Name of the Rose: 'The constructed world will [...] tell us how the story must proceed [...] when I put Jorge in the library I did not yet know he was the murderer [...] the fact is that the characters are obliged to act according to the laws of the world in which they live.'[93] The principle that 'right in art is right in practice' runs through both Sayers's novels and the plays, so much so that in 1943 Sayers was able to make the confident assertion that 'at no point have I yet found artistic truth and theological truth at variance.'[94]

[92] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 98.
[93] Eco, *Reflections*, 27-8.
[94] Sayers, *Man Born*, 19.

Chapter Three
Sayers's Lay Theology, *The Zeal of Thy House* and *The Mind of the Maker*

Sayers as Lay Theologian

Sayers regarded herself as first and foremost a creative artist, a term that includes her work as a translator. From 1937 when she emerged as a religious dramatist she was asked with increasing frequency to lecture and write on religious subjects, but she did so with reluctance, voicing reservations about her role as a lay apologist as early March 1939: 'I am really a novelist and dramatist and not a Christian evangelist.'[1] The belief that a work of art will speak for itself is the central point of both her theological aesthetics and her practice as a playwright. In this and the following chapters I shall examine Sayers's plays in the light of her much-quoted claim that 'the dogma is the drama,' asking whether the plays do, as Sayers believed, embody structurally and thematically a theology that supersedes any need for evangelism within the work of art itself. My starting point is a review of Sayers's development as a lay theologian.

When Archbishop William Temple offered Sayers a Lambeth doctorate in 1943 she refused, and there has been speculation about her reasons for doing so. She may have feared that the existence of her illegitimate son might be brought to light, and that this would damage not only her own reputation but that of the Church. The reason she gave Temple was that 'I would feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian'[2] and that 'any good I can do in the way of presenting the Christian Faith to the common people is bound to be hampered and impeded the moment I carry any sort of ecclesiastical label.'[3] She goes on to say that she would have fewer reservations if the work rather than the person were to be honoured, and as we have seen, one of Sayers's recurring themes was the danger that an artist would begin to think he or she was God. Peter Webster has examined the episode in detail, and his convincing discussion of Sayers's misgivings additionally points out that while Bell and Temple expressed support in their writings for the independence of artists working on church commissions, in conversation they were inclined to refer to works

[1] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 118-9.
[2] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 429.
[3] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 431.

such as *The Man Born to be King* in terms of their evangelistic impact,[4] and Sayers was annoyed by this, believing as she did that 'playwrights are not evangelists.'

In 1954 Sayers recalled this time of public exposure as 'a desperate struggle to hold on to the rags of one's integrity',[5] and it is true that she was the focus of competing demands. The forthright tones of her letter to Bell in July 1940 are a breath of fresh air among his more reverent correspondents:

> My dear Lord Bishop, Look! Here are the things I have contracted to do during the next three months or so: Finish book on the Creative Mind (over-due); Write and deliver two broadcasts on Christianity;[6] […] Write twelve broadcast plays on Life of Christ (not begun); Write paper for Archbishop of York's Conference (ditto.); […] Write 'Anti-Rumour' pamphlet for M.O.I. [Ministry of Information] (held up by violent quarrel with Ministry, but may be wanted) […] I don't really think I can honestly take on anything more....[7]

This high-spirited letter might give the impression that Sayers was revelling in the new demands imposed by a state of war, but in fact her quarrel with the Ministry of Information was not the only occasion on which there was a mismatch between what she felt called to write and what others wanted from her.[8] The first of Sayers's sequence of plays on the life of Christ, *The Man Born to be King*, was broadcast on BBC radio in December the following year following lengthy disputes with the editorial team. These may have left their mark on *The Mind of the Maker*, published in July 1941, whose theme of human creativity as a reflection of God's creation is a powerful plea for the freedom of the artist to serve the work.

Malvern 1941: Christ, the Artist and the Law

In January 1941 William Temple, still at that time Archbishop of York, convened a conference 'to consider how far the Christian faith and principles based upon it could

---

[4] Peter Webster, "Archbishop Temple's offer of a Lambeth degree to Dorothy L. Sayers," in *From the Reformation to the Permissive Society*, ed. Melanie Barber and Stephen Taylor, with Gabriel Sewell (Church of England Record Society, xviii, 2010), 573.

[5] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 139.

[6] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Christ of the Creeds & Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II*, ed. Suzanne Bray (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008), 4. Bray quotes an unpublished letter to Sayers from James Welch, Director of Religious Broadcasting at the BBC, dated 10 July 1940, in which he says he has asked his colleague Eric Fenn to invite her to give two talks and adds: 'don't spare the dynamite!'. Sayers had already expressed to Fenn her uneasiness with the role of Christian apologist (*Letters Two*, 167).

[7] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 173.

[8] C.S. Lewis later criticised her reluctance to write to order: Sayers, *Letters Three*, 252-57.

afford guidance for action in the world today.'[9] It drew on some of the ideas discussed in Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), Bell's *Christianity and World Order* (1940) and Temple's own forthcoming *Christianity and Social Order* (1942).[10] Temple's opening address announces that the speakers have been chosen bearing in mind the need to reach coherent conclusions.[11] They are Anglicans who believe that 'there is a truth about the political and social life of man which is at once divine in essence (for man is God's creature) and apprehensible by reason.'[12] Temple's introduction demonstrates close links with Sayers's thinking as she moved into the world of apologetics. He cites Maritain as a theologian of importance, who takes human beings 'in the relationships of their social contexts';[13] a few months later Sayers listed Maritain as a leading Christian thinker.[14] For Temple, however, Niebuhr is more significant when it comes to addressing that tendency in humankind 'which consists in putting himself in the centre where God alone ought to be'.[15] Sayers too was preoccupied with this theme, and Niebuhr is quoted in *The Mind of the Maker*.[16]

As a speaker, Sayers took her place as a lay theologian alongside Eliot, and among professionals such as V.A. Demant and Donald MacKinnon, later the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge. She must have been conscious of pressure on her as a laywoman, and the only woman speaker, to prove her grasp of theology, and her emphasis on a general sacramentality in line with Temple's thinking may have been a way of establishing her credentials. Sayers's lecture, entitled "The Church's Responsibility",[17] reaches a focus in 'a realistic and sacramental theology of the Incarnation'.

> If she [the Church] undertakes to sanctify humanity, it must be the *whole* of humanity. She must include within her sacraments all arts, all letters, all labour and all learning; […] For she stands committed to the assertion that all

[9] William Temple, Introduction, *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society, being the proceedings of the Archbishop of York's conference* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941), vii.
[10] T.S. Eliot, *The Idea of a Christian Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939); G.K.A. Bell, *Christianity and World Order* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940); William Temple, *Christianity and Social Order* (London: SCM Press, 1942).
[11] Temple, *Malvern*, 11.
[12] Temple, *Malvern*, 12.
[13] Temple, *Malvern*, 14.
[14] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 256.
[15] Temple, *Malvern*, 14.
[16] Sayers, *Mind*, 163.
[17] Sayers, "The Church's Responsibility," in *Malvern*, 57-78.

> human activity, whether of spirit, mind or body, is potentially good – not negatively, by repression, but positively, and as an act of worship. Further, she must include a proper reverence for the earth and for all material things; because these also are the body of the living God.[18]

Later in the year she wrote to Demant that '[...] an Incarnate Creator is the fundamental sanction for looking on all man's work in a sacramental light.'[19] For Sayers in her Malvern address, a sacramental understanding of the whole of life means that time-bound and historically specific rules and codes are signs of the greater principles they embody. Only by identifying the spirit behind the law is the Church or individual able to apply the law with love and thus meet the needs of the community.

Sayers compares the Church with both Nazi Germany and the world of the theatre as paradigms of communities where a common endeavour unites disparate parts into a whole. Both the theatre and 'Nazi-ism' embrace the whole of society, a startling conjunction that draws attention to Sayers's point about community before she goes on to their radical difference.[20] That difference is to be found in their use of the Law, which in the case of the theatre has a compassionate dimension that mirrors the challenging attitude of Christ.

> It is significant that Christ, who came to fulfil the Law, should have shown so much sympathy towards those who broke it […] For His own method of fulfilling the Law was to proclaim a kingdom in which the judgment of the Law had no need to operate […] His reception of […] the Vigilance Committee for the Preservation of Public Morals was singularly discouraging: […] 'Doubtless the woman is in fault; but the point is, are you in any position to find fault?' We will not argue; we will merely put the whole discussion outside the scope of this kind of argument.[21]

The theatre is a community united by love, the Nazi empire by fear. What of the Church? Personal integrity among practising Christians 'is directed rather more strongly to observance of the Law than to the worship of the everlasting Truth.'[22] For

---

[18] Sayers, *Malvern*, 67.

[19] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 348.

[20] The conjunction may seem startling, but Sayers is clear about the overall tendency of Nazism: 'It is a commonplace that the Church of Rome was so hypnotized by the menace of Communism that she has been very seriously hampered (to say the least of it) in dealing with the theological menace of the Nazi religion.' *Malvern*, 71.

[21] Sayers, *Malvern*, 69-70.

[22] Sayers, *Malvern*, 74.

Sayers, truth is a relation: it keeps the person who thinks and writes and acts with integrity in touch with the reality that in its turn feeds that integrity. This is where Malvern anticipates the arguments of *The Mind of the Maker*, published later in the year. The Church has 'very little reverence for intellectual integrity' and is 'ignorant that the integrity of the artist exists at all as a power within the world [...] and that if a statue is ill-carved or a play ill-written, the artist's corruption is deeper than if the statue were obscene and the play blasphemous. Deeper, because the artist is being false to his own vision of the Truth; because it is a sapping from within of that disinterested integrity which is the point at which men can touch the Truth that is outside space and time.'[23]

The artist's vision of the Truth is identified with the intellectual integrity that refuses to distort facts, and it supersedes the aesthetic and moral rules that may be promoted by people with a limited understanding of divine reality. 'I say this frankly: I believe the Church of Christ [...] will fail whenever she identifies herself with the systems and the moralities which are of the nature of law.'[24] Sayers is aware that 'this conclusion presents a number of difficulties in practice' but the Church has a 'unique assistance' in the Incarnation of God as a man.

> And this particular Man it has never been possible to identify with any social, political or economic system, or with any moral code. He seems literally all things to all men; to the rebel, a revolutionary; to the lover of political order, the sanction for the tribute paid to Caesar; to the virtuous, the King of virgins; to the sinner, the friend of harlots and publicans; […]; filling all the categories and contained by none; and with all this, a single, recognizable, and complete personality.[25]

The brief of the conference was a political one and Sayers's argument is not only that the spirit of the law, rather than the letter, is a guide to contemporary renewal but also that 'The only Christian work is good work well done,' as she wrote in her 1942 article "Why Work?".[26] Behind her argument lies a belief comparable with Temple's that the Incarnation sanctifies all human life so that everything within it takes on a sacramental force.

---

[23] Sayers, *Malvern*, 75.
[24] Sayers, *Malvern*, 77.
[25] Sayers, *Malvern*, 78.
[26] Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*, 59.

Locating Sayers in a Tradition of Theology and the Arts

In 1941 Sayers had not yet met the lay apologist C.S. Lewis with whose work her apologetics are often compared; Lewis's own major works of apologetics, starting with *The Screwtape Letters* in 1942, were in the future, and as he himself said to a correspondent, 'Miss Sayers was an established author before I was heard of.'[27] A major influence on Sayers, however, not only in drama but also in apologetics, was Lewis's friend Charles Williams, particularly his *Descent of the Dove* (1939) and *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938). They were all influenced by the book of lay apologetics that cast a prophetic shadow over the whole of the twentieth century, G.K. Chesterton's *Everlasting Man* (1908).[28] In addition to the influence of people Sayers knew, it is also possible to locate her theology in the nineteenth century Lux Mundi tradition, as Laura K. Simmons has done,[29] maintaining an Anglo-Catholic churchmanship that accepts the conclusions of modern scholarship with regard to evolution and biblical criticism. Giles Watson has drawn attention to the similarity of Sayers's ideas with those of the Moot, a study group operating between 1938 and 1947 and including among its members Sayers's correspondents Eliot, MacKinnon, the group's convenor J.H. Oldham, and Gilbert Shaw.[30] Sayers was on the advisory committee for *The Christian News-Letter*, a publication closely associated with the Moot.[31] Temple distanced himself from the group, however, while Sayers was only on the fringes, and according to Temple's biographer John Kent, 'the Moot [...] was more interested in power than theology.'[32] Sayers also corresponded with the leading members of the Christendom group, V.A. Demant and Maurice Reckitt, without following their medieval model of social organisation.

The sacramentality of all creation deriving from the proposition that the Incarnation had divinised every aspect of the material world was the basis for a specific focus on the sacramentality of work among the craft guild Anglicans with whom Sayers was in sympathy, and in a discussion of *Zeal* in 1987, Patrick McLaughlin, Sayers's parish priest at St Thomas's Regent Street in London, said:

---

[27] C.S Lewis, *Collected Letters Volume Three: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950–1963*, ed. Walter Hooper (Kindle Location 18743). HarperCollins Publishers. Kindle Edition.
[28] G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1927 (1908)).
[29] Simmons, *Creed without Chaos*, 42, 44.
[30] Giles Watson, "Catholicism in Anglican Culture and Theology: Responses to Crisis in England (1937-1949)," (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1998), in particular 221-70.
[31] Keith Clements, ed., *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society 1938-1944* (London: T. and T. Clark, 2010), 248. For mention of Sayers's gifts as a communicator, see 148, 285, 713.
[32] John Kent, *William Temple* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149.

> Dorothy found the idea of integrity already exemplified by Eric Gill who expressed it both in his work and in his writings. He was an important exponent of that theory and an important part of that epoch of history. She always said that the idea of 'the work' was made clear to her by Gill.[33]

David Jones, who had been a member of Gill's Ditchling community, developed the theme in a more overtly ecclesiastical way in the 1955 essay "Art and Sacrament", arguing that believers in the sacraments of the Church, effectively High Anglicans and Roman Catholics, necessarily regarded every aspect of their lives and work as meeting places with God.[34] Like Jones, Sayers used the artist's respect for the integrity of the work as a paradigm for all kinds of work. In the Postscript to *Mind* Sayers concluded: 'That the eyes of all workers should behold the integrity of the work is the sole means to make that work good in itself and so good for mankind.'[35]

Apart from the Detection Club, Sayers was not a member of any literary or theological group and while I shall argue that ultimately her work has an originality that takes it beyond adherence to any one school, there are two areas in which I shall locate her dramatic theory and practice, one broadly theological, the other broadly literary. First, Maritain's strain of Neo-Scholasticism influenced Chesterton, Williams and Sayers herself, as well as Eliot, Gill and David Jones. Maritain maintained that the work of the artist was continuous with God's work in creation, and while in *The Mind of the Maker* Sayers suggests that human creativity is analogous rather than continuous with God's, the derivation of human creativity from God as creator holds good in either case. Secondly, Sayers was also involved in debates initiated by George Bell and his drama adviser E. Martin Browne about what religious art could and should be, and it is in this area of influence that her dramatic practice evolved. There was considerable overlap between these theological and theatrical schools of thought, notably in an emphasis on the Incarnation as a guarantee of God's presence in the whole of creation and on a resulting sacramental theology. My argument is that Sayers took the principle of a sacramental universe accepted by the Canterbury Festival playwrights and focused it in the dramatisation of sacramental events in a way that was entirely her own.

---

[33] *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 8.
[34] Jones, *Epoch*, 143-79.
[35] Sayers, *Mind*, 183-4.

The mid-century was a period in which both practical and theological questions surrounding art in the service of the Church were very much alive. Bell's first dramatic commission as Dean of Canterbury, *The Coming of Christ*, ran into controversy when Masefield introduced the "Anima Christi", Spirit of Christ, debating with a group of angels the pros and cons of being born as a man. Masefield defended the apparent unorthodoxy by saying 'Christ *is* the highest in heaven, but not yet God to mankind,'[36] but Bell negotiated some rewording. As Bishop of Chichester Bell became steadily more supportive of an artist's freedom to interpret and when a commission for a church mural from Hans Feibusch in Goring-on-Sea became the subject of a consistory court hearing in 1953, Bell's judgment was unequivocal:

> Unless the Church is to be sterile in the fostering of creative art, it must be prepared to trust its chosen artists to begin their work and carry it through to the end as the fulfilment of a trust, the terms and circumstances of which they understand and respect.[37]

Sayers was present at Bell's 1944 conference on "The Church and the Arts" which included both Feibusch and Henry Moore, and her public status as an apologist for whom clarity was paramount is evident in the fact that she was invited to give a paper on "The Problem of Translation (Communication)".[38] I shall argue in Chapter Eight that it is not fanciful to detect her influence on Bell's thinking about the relationship between the Church and the Arts.

Sayers was adamant that her work was not that of an evangelist, and this will be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight. She justified her position with the argument that if the artistic process reflects God's Trinitarian creativity, it will not only speak of God in itself but will also critique its own subject matter through the balance and interdependence of its constituent parts: '[...] unless you keep the God-Man idea properly balanced, your play, as a mere piece of dramatic structure, falls to pieces and makes no artistic sense.'[39] Her position on religious drama is the same as on any work: if the writer and creative team serve the work with integrity, the truth about a world divinised by the Incarnation will emerge from it.

---

[36] Letter from Masefield to Bell, 15 November 1927. 153/104, Lambeth Palace Library, MS Bell.
[37] Ronald C.D. Jasper, *George Bell, Bishop of Chichester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 133.
[38] Bell's Memorandum is in Lambeth Palace Library, MS Bell 151/190-96.
[39] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 44.

Sayers and Originality

Sayers saw all her work in apologetics as translation: '[Writers] can, so far as our competence goes, help to disentangle the language-trouble by translating from one jargon into another,'[40] and Christine Fletcher has applied this claim to Sayers's whole 'perception of her task and method'. [41] Colloquial reformulations of received opinions, together with a dedication to finding contemporary illustrations, are central to the way she grounds abstraction in the concrete. Her aim of clarity and directness, both in apologetics and in drama, undoubtedly derives to some extent from her work as a copywriter at Benson's advertising agency. An example of an effective reformulation is her characterization of the doctors of the law and the Pharisees who confront Jesus with the woman taken in adultery, quoted above, as 'the Vigilance Committee for the Preservation of Public Morals'. The pompous formulation 'Vigilance Committee' suggests an over-zealous and condemnatory attitude which modern readers will readily apply to examples in their own society. Sayers clearly enjoyed the verbal games which such reformulations involved, revelling in her own powers of translation, an art-form in which she had a lifelong facility, with the goal of finding ways of making the familiar seem new and real.

It may be argued that reformulation of abstract concepts inevitably involves some shift in meaning, but Sayers's answer would be that if the theology was intact and the writer approached the task with integrity, the Trinitarian dynamic would exercise its own constraint, critiquing the subject matter. One of the elements that deceived the unwary into thinking that Sayers had a new theological approach was her conscious use of a journalistic register, a misinterpretation to which the apologists she particularly admired, G.K. Chesterton and Charles Williams, also fell victim. The charge of originality was particularly annoying to Sayers because she was always at pains to emphasize that her exposition of the Christian faith had no particular implication for her own belief. When the former Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford, wrote in *The Spectator* that 'Miss Sayers [...] elaborates her own system of Christian teaching or doctrine,'[42] Sayers was insistent in her reply that 'the doctrinal system [...] is that of the Church.'[43] In the Introduction to *The Just Vengeance* (1946), in a clear parody of the familiar clichés of the copywriter, she thunders:

---

[40] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 141-2.
[41] Fletcher, *Artist*, xix.
[42] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 169.
[43] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 170.

'Being concerned as it is with the eternal witness of the Church to the central doctrine of the Incarnation, the play contains no "original thought about" and no "new interpretation of" anything whatever. "Originality" in such matters is out of place: the thought is that of the Church and the interpretation that of her doctors and confessors.'[44]

Sayers extended the commitment to communicate orthodox theology in a clear and striking way into her work as a playwright, and in this context it is worth noting that *The Zeal of Thy House* was the only Canterbury play to go on tour nationally, touring over twenty provincial theatres between September 1938 and May 1939, with a week's run in each, including Birmingham, Leeds. Liverpool, Brighton, Norwich and Bournemouth, and giving repeat runs in the last two cities. Throughout the tour Sayers kept in close touch with her leading actor-directors Harcourt Williams and Frank Napier, and the tour was substantially financed by Sayers herself.[45] This speaks unequivocally of her commitment to bringing theological ideas to the general public. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* had a London run and was broadcast on BBC television the year after its Canterbury premiere, so it too reached a wide audience, but the experience of taking *Zeal* to provincial theatres where some of the Saturday night audience were present more for the sake of a night out than for any particular interest in the play itself reveals that Sayers had the courage of her deeply-held conviction that people would respond to theology presented in an accessible form. She also had a better understanding than her predecessors at Canterbury, Eliot and Williams, of what would pull an audience in to theatres, and the fact that *Zeal* has a love story intertwined with its theology is in my opinion one of the explanations of its popular success. It may also partly account for the fact that according to Brabazon, Margaret Babington, the Festival organiser, wrote to Sayers that '*The Zeal of Thy House* was far and away the best play that they had yet produced.'[46] Hone comments that the affair between William and Lady Ursula provides 'a variation of the love-story with detective interruptions', which is how Sayers described *Busman's Honeymoon*.[47]

---

[44] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 280.
[45] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 98-9. Not only did Sayers put her own savings into it but she also lent her name to a 'night starvation' advertisement for Horlicks in order to raise money.
[46] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 161 (no reference given).
[47] Hone, *Sayers*, 90.

Sayers's plays, apologetics and correspondence demonstrate her eagerness to communicate theological ideas to the general public. She vigorously repudiated any suggestion that it was her personal faith she was communicating: she wanted to show people through drama and tell them through lectures what the church taught, leaving them to work out the consequences in their own lives. At the heart of Sayers's theology was a hermeneutical imperative, as we shall see in each of the plays and in particular *The Man Born to be King*. But in spite of the fact that Karl Barth suggested that she had Pelagian tendencies,[48] she did not expect people to work out their own salvation without help, and this study will also trace the development in Sayers's plays of an increasingly sacramental emphasis.

The Zeal of Thy House

The Genesis of *The Zeal of Thy House*

Sayers explicitly saw her plays as continuing the themes of the novels: in *The Mind of the Maker* she points out that *Zeal* has the same theme as her previous novel *Gaudy Night* and connects it with her first novel: '[...] and now, after nearly twenty years, I can hear in *Whose Body?* the notes of that tune sounding unmistakably under the tripping melody of a very different descant.'[49] Critics who expressed surprise at the move from detective novels to cathedral drama were completely missing the point that theology is a way of understanding everyday life. In *The Documents in the Case* Sayers had used dramatic methodology to make a theological point, and she had employed multi-layered theological symbolism in *The Nine Tailors*. *Gaudy Night* was a study in the theme of the integrity of the work as a point of contact between art and personal morality, reflecting Maritain's distinction between art and Prudence. In *Zeal* Sayers extends the theme to make the integrity of the work the point of contact between humans and God. To quote Sayers's friend and biographer Barbara Reynolds on the link between the novel and the play: 'Is integrity, then, the Father-Idea of *The Zeal of Thy House*? Dorothy Sayers said that it was and said it more than once.'[50]

---

[48] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 259. See also Holger Forssmann, "Karl Barth – Dorothy L. Sayers: An Introduction to their Correspondence", in *Proceedings of the Meeting at the Malteser Kommende Ehereshoven, 2-5 June 2006*, ed. Geraldine Perriam (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2006), 17-32. .

[49] Sayers, *Mind*, 168.

[50] Barbara Reynolds, untitled, *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 5.



Fig. 4. The Chapter examines the plans of the rival architects.



Fig. 5. William of Sens and Archangels in *The Zeal of Thy House*.

Zeal was commissioned in 1937 for the Canterbury Festival and was Sayers's first religious play, although the previous year she had had a West End success with the Wimsey play *Busman's Honeymoon*, written with her friend Muriel St Clare Byrne. The Friends of Canterbury Cathedral had started commissioning new plays for an annual festival with *The Coming of Christ* by John Masefield in 1928, and the festival received a new impetus with the success of the 1935 play, Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. Charles Williams's *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* followed in 1936, and according to Babington it was Williams who suggested Sayers as the next playwright. In 1936 Sayers was not an obvious choice; *Busman's Honeymoon* was still in rehearsal and she was not yet known as a playwright. Reynolds suggests[51] that Williams might have remembered her dramatic poem "The Mocking of Christ" from a volume of early poetry, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, but since secular playwrights used religious themes in their work from time to time, for instance Shaw in *St Joan* (1924), it is possible that Williams made the recommendation simply on the basis of Sayers's authorship of *Busman's Honeymoon*. After the festival production *Zeal* had a West End run and a national tour, and its success led to a second Festival commission for Sayers in 1939, for which she wrote *The Devil to Pay*. A planned revival of *Zeal* for the Festival in 1940 was deferred until 1949. Kenneth Pickering's 50th anniversary production in Canterbury Cathedral was played in the crossing where William actually fell.[52]

Reynolds has described the process through which Sayers's imagination was captured, first by the festival theme celebrating "The Arts and Crafts", and secondly by the chronicle of the twelfth century monk Gervase. The chronicle described the rebuilding of the cathedral after its destruction by fire in 1174, ascribing the architect William of Sens's disabling fall to 'the vengeance of God or the envy of the devil'.[53] Sayers later wrote that 'I liked the story, which could be so handled as to deal with the "proper truth" of the artist.'[54] She was also interested in the chronicler's speculation about the cause of William's fall, and decided to construct the story in such a way that William brings his fate upon himself, both physically and spiritually, through a failure in integrity, planting clues in the dialogue in the manner of

---

[51] Sayers, *Letters One*, 401.

[52] Kenneth Pickering, "The Found Space," in *Joint Meeting of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society and the Charles Williams Society*, ed. Geraldine Perriam (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2010), 38-9.

[53] Reynolds, *Life and Soul*, 273-5.

[54] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 139.

detective fiction. In March 1937 she wrote to Babington that she was holding back details that would anticipate the last scene because Laurence Irving felt that 'it would be more interesting for the audience to work out for themselves what sin it was for which William was punished amid the conflicting theories put forward by [...] the other characters.'[55] The designer Laurence Irving was a key figure in the play's early development, while Harcourt Williams, who played the central character and also directed, made substantial changes to the completed play in rehearsal.[56] Pickering demonstrates that Williams as producer/director, assisted by Frank Napier, who played Theodatus, exercised an important influence on Sayers's understanding of stagecraft, and her mainly unpublished letters to Williams and Napier during the play's tour bear this out.[57] Williams was known for his naturalism as the director of the Old Vic, but as an Anglo-Catholic he became drawn towards the verse drama movement promoted by the Casson family, which included Sybil Thorndike.[58]

Sayers's theme in *Zeal* is the need for the artist to serve the integrity of a work of art, embodied in a narrative revolving round the Norman architect William of Sens. Historically, as in the play, William continued to direct the work from ground level after a fall from the scaffolding, but eventually handed the work over to another architect. In Sayers's play he becomes a charismatic personality who makes enemies professionally because he cuts corners, and personally because of his affair with one of the cathedral's patrons, the widow Lady Ursula. The theological point is that the integrity of the work is independent of the artist's personal morality. William does not serve the work, however, with complete integrity, because he claims hubristic parity with God in the act of creation, failing to see that his material is already part of God's creation. The crisis comes when a workman and a monk test the rope for flaws as William prepares to ascend the scaffolding to fix the corner-stone of the central arch. Distracted by William's flirting with Lady Ursula, the two miss a flaw. At the moment of breaking the Archangel Michael is seen severing the rope, but Sayers makes it clear that this is not a case of divine intervention: the angels are agents of human choice. William's direction of the work from ground level indicates that he

---

[55] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 19.

[56] Pickering, *Drama*, 224-6. Harcourt ('Billy') Williams also played Faustus in *The Devil to Pay* and was the subject of Sayers's dedicatory sonnet. Her unfinished play *Herod the Great* was started with Williams in mind (*Letters Two*, 198).

[57] *The Devil to Pay* folders 1.1 – 1.5, Sayers archive, The Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College.

[58] Kenneth Pickering, untitled, *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 14.

continues to think himself indispensable, but in a vision of the Archangel, he is finally brought to a confession of his sin of pride, 'the eldest sin of all' (Fig, 5, p. 41).[59] The hubris on which the action of the play turns is expressed in William's speech 'We are the master-craftsmen, God and I' (67). Sayers wrote to Irving: 'You should have heard Charles Williams reading this passage aloud in Simpsons, bouncing a great deal upon his chair and saying: "of course, you know, it is all quite true" – here the waiter brought us cold lobster – "Ah! now! it really is blasphemy" ' – much to my embarrassment.'[60] From what we know of Sayers, the embarrassment is not likely to have been very great. The blasphemy identified by Williams is the architect's belief that his own talent is indispensable to God.

The Zeal of Thy House was performed in the Chapter House in front of Irving's permanent flexible staging, and the opening scene of the play is in fact a meeting of the Cathedral Chapter (Fig. 4, p. 81). The stage management was very different from what Sayers had encountered in a purpose-built West End theatre:

> [...] the screens [...] are permanent structures of wood and canvas designed and built in by Laurence Irving [...] on the right-hand side, a narrow passage and awkward staircase lead to something which I have not yet dared to investigate, but where, I believe, performers can be got on and off in sufficient numbers, and from which they can, by running very hard, escape, to appear again at the bottom of the building, after traversing most of the Cathedral and Cloisters.[61]

From the beginning of her playwriting career Sayers threw herself into a full involvement with all the material and physical aspects of production. She quickly learned to make a virtue of the space's limitations, using entrances and exits through the audience which, as we have seen from Twycross's comments on the mystery plays, creates a body of 'responsive participants'.

Scenes I – III: The Integrity of the Artist

Zeal is in four scenes, the first three telling the story of William's rebuilding up to his fall, and the final scene presenting his *anagnorisis* and repentance (Fig. 5, p. 81). Central to the theme of integrity in *Zeal* is the fact that disinterested service of the

---

[59] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Zeal of Thy House*, *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1948), 98. Subsequent references will be given in the text.
[60] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 14.
[61] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 23.

work can and probably should be unconscious. In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain wrote:

> The cathedral builders had no sort of thesis in mind [...] Their achievement revealed God's truth, but without *doing it on purpose,* and because it was not done on purpose.[62]

In *Zeal* William of Sens is criticised by some members of the cathedral chapter for his lack of commitment to religious observance, but the Archangel Raphael says that his 'unsleeping arches with perpetual voice/ Proclaim in Heaven, to labour is to pray' (38). As we have seen, Sayers was writing at a time when there was debate about whether the human artist participates in God's work by continuation or analogy and this distinction is significant for the identification of William's sin in *Zeal*. A belief that human art is continuous with God's becomes in William a conviction that his work is equal with God's, forgetting that the artist's generativity is always subject to a dependence on God's materials: to quote Maritain, 'by developing the faculties with which the Creator has endowed him [...] and making use of created matter, [the artist] creates, as it were, in the second degree,'[63] a description reminiscent of Coleridge's 'secondary imagination' (pp. 63-4). The principle that *laborare est orare* implies a subordination of the creature to the creator, and while insistence on the principle does not commit Sayers to either side of the argument regarding creativity as continuation or analogy, it does imply that a voluntary subordination to God's will is implicit in a commitment to the good of the work. So whether or not William is continuing God's work or reflecting it, his consciously setting himself up as God's equal has a blasphemous implication.

Sayers emphasised the thematic connection between *Zeal* and the novel *Gaudy Night*,[64] which balances academic integrity against personal loyalty and comes down on the side of integrity. Malevolent disturbances at an Oxford women's college are initially blamed on the dons themselves but are traced to a college servant whose husband's academic career was ruined when he was discovered by one of the dons to have falsified a fact in a thesis. The fact that the disturbances proceed from blind heterosexual devotion causes Wimsey to fear that the solution will strengthen Harriet's resistance to the idea of marriage, but he demonstrates a commitment to the

---

[62] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 52.
[63] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 48.
[64] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (Victor Gollancz, 1935).

integrity of his own work by not letting that affect his investigation. Harriet, in her turn, recognises the personal integrity behind Wimsey's decision and also the fact that in practice it means he places as high a value on women's professional work as they do themselves. So she accepts his proposal. As in the earlier novels, Sayers's formidable structural powers enable her to dovetail her philosophical point with both the detective story and the love story.

The Zeal of Thy House also embodies an affirmation of the integrity of the work in hand for its own sake. William attends the job interview with no preliminary drawings, and will not commit himself to any plan for Canterbury in advance of a full survey. William's argument is that the work itself will impose its own directions, a principle Sayers developed in *The Mind of the Maker*, while his two rivals for the job offer the solutions they think are likely to appeal to the Chapter (Fig. 4, p. 81). In choosing William the Chapter implicitly accepts the principle of the integrity of the work. Some monks, led by the zealous Theodatus, would prefer a man who is more devout: 'I would rather have/A worse-built church with a more virtuous builder'(59). Maritain's principle of 'the good of the work' has something in common with the important Catholic principle of *ex opere operato*: the validity of a sacrament is not affected by the unworthiness of the minister. The question of whether William's sins as a man can and should be separated from his work as an artist is one of the threads in the story that the audience has to work out from the dialogue in tandem with the action; in other words, one of the ways in which 'the dogma is the drama'. The narrative of *Zeal* is subject to comment throughout by four Archangels with huge wings who are God's agents but do not initiate action. Michael records William's 'Jugglings with truth, and gross lusts of the body,/Drink, drabbing, swearing; slothfulness in prayer;/With a devouring, insolent ambition/That challenges disaster', while on the credit side Gabriel notes down six aisles and vaults 'All well and truly laid without a fault' (37). When Cassiel asks whether there is a 'sum of prayer to balance the account' Raphael's response is that 'when the mouth is dumb, the work shall speak/And save the workman (38). The principle that to labour is to pray is tested to the limits in the following scenes, where William cuts corners and takes bribes, though he ploughs money so gained back into the work.

The arrival of a rich patron, Lady Ursula de Warbois, moves the play into the Garden of Eden, giving William's later fall a clear symbolic resonance. He tells Ursula that

'In one man's life/Is room for one love and no more – one love;/I am in love with a dream' (50). William assumes that Ursula, as a woman, is unable to share a man's dream, citing Adam and Eve, but Ursula, as Eve was later to do in *The Just Vengeance*, claims the intellectual life for Woman, who 'Let in man's dream on the world, and snatched the torch/of knowledge from the jealous hand of God' (52). As in *Gaudy Night*, therefore, it is women's thirst for knowledge that initiates the action. Raphael explicitly connects the scene with Adam and Eve and the Fall by saying 'O felix culpa, quae/Talem et tantum meruit Redemptorem!' [O welcome sin, whose effect was to merit a Redeemer of such quality and scope!'] (52). The scene ends with William's telling Ursula 'I will come to your lodging after supper' (53). The difficulties Sayers described as the play took shape included 'making the relation of William and the Lady Ursula sufficiently defined to be interesting without offending the Dean and Chapter'.[65] When scandal ensues, the Prior, one of Sayers's unworldly but wise mediators between the protagonists and their consciences, comparable with Miss de Vine in *Gaudy Night*, bases his rebuke to William squarely in the good of the work:

> WILLIAM Very well. As my *employer*, to use your own blunt term, what fault have you to find with my private amusements?
> PRIOR This: that instead of attending to their work, your workmen waste their time in gossip and backbiting about you. If you choose to be damned, you must; if you prefer to make a death-bed repentance, you may; but if an idle workman does an unsound job now, no repentance of yours will prevent it bringing down the church some day or other.
> WILLIAM (*after a pause*) You are quite right. I congratulate you. You have found the one argument to which I am bound to listen (63).

The Prior has used William's concern for the integrity of his work to suggest that his open flirtation with Ursula is ill-advised. It is, however, too late. William has already asked Theodatus to help the irrepressible young workman Simon to test the rope which will hoist him up to put the keystone in place, and the two are running the rope off the windlass, examining it for flaws, during the dialogue between William and the Prior, a scene which makes the theological point visually. When Ursula enters, Theodatus averts his eyes and recites the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, while Simon sings a suggestive ditty: neither of them is watching the rope. Meanwhile the Archangels draw attention to the flaw among themselves, making it clear that when

[65] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 12.

Michael is later seen by a child cutting the rope of the pulley he is using the symbolic sword William has forged for himself:

> Are there no fires in Heaven that every man
> With his own hand, upon the anvil of sin
> Forges the sword of judgment? Gabriel, Raphael,
> There is a sword in the making; look you to it (64).

The apparatus of God's judgment is made visible, but retribution is a human choice, not God's. Two versicles and responses follow and Raphael stands by Theodatus, swinging his censer, giving the scene a liturgical quality and implying that it is the will of God, not to impose arbitrary punishment, but to see that judgment is executed on those sinners who forge their own instruments of justice. The fact that William will ascend in a contraption of his own devising makes the same point.

The seeds of the catastrophe have been sown long before, and there is no theological difference between the piety of Theodatus's distraction and the earthiness of Simon's, though morally Theodatus is less honest; they both fail to serve the good of the work through a failure of attention to the task in hand. The keystone is itself symbolic: the stone which will hold the whole building together represents both God at work in his creation and the summit of the human artist's achievement. The central theological point is that William fails to realise that the two things are not the same, and therefore the act of putting the stone in place goes wrong for him personally, though not for the cathedral. The immediate cause of William's fall is the affair with Ursula and superficially it might appear that he is being punished for that. But as the Prior has made clear, his private morality is between him and God. In fact, as we later realise, William wants Ursula to see the great moment of placing the keystone in the arch because he loves her. It is his failure of attention to every aspect of God's work, not the flirtation but its effects, that brings about his downfall. Nowhere are Sayers's words 'the dogma is the drama' more precisely exemplified.

Before the fall William tells Ursula they are in disgrace with the Prior and her response 'Do we presume too much upon God's mercy?' (67) provides William with the opportunity for his great set-piece:

> We are the master-craftsmen, God and I –
> We understand one another. None, as I can,
> Can creep under the ribs of God, and feel

> His heart beat through those Six Days of Creation;
> Enormous days of slowly turning lights
> Streaking the yet unseasoned firmament (67).

So far his words could be an expression of joy at sharing God's work of creation but he goes on:

> And lastly, since all Heaven was not enough
> To share that triumph, He made His masterpiece,
> Man, that like God can call beauty from dust,
> Order from chaos, and create new worlds
> To praise their maker. Oh, but in making man
> God over-reached Himself and gave away
> His Godhead. He must now depend on man
> For what man's brain, creative and divine,
> Can give Him. Man stands equal with Him now,
> Partner and rival.
> [...] This church is mine
> And none but I, not even God, can build it (68).

The subtlety of these lines lies in the fact that despite William's hubris they embody the profound truth that God has no hands on earth but ours, in the words attributed to St Teresa of Avila. This perception is at the centre of Sayers's analogy between human and divine creation. Humans are developing the creative potentialities of God's world by using their God-given talents but to achieve the ends that accord with God's will they are subject to the difficulty of knowing what that will is.

For Sayers, natural law means that the human creative impulse is in itself good, and William's church is acknowledged to be a masterpiece. His refusal to recognise that all his talent is God-given mars the integrity of the work in himself, but not in its material manifestation, and there is a clear distinction between the artist and the work. To quote from Maritain's discussion of Art and Prudence:

> The artist will nevertheless require a measure of heroism to keep always in the direct line of Action and not to sacrifice his immortal substance to the devouring idol in his soul. The truth is that such conflicts can be abolished only on condition that a deep humility make the artist as it were unconscious of his art, or if the all-powerful unction of wisdom imbue everything in him with the repose and peace of love. Fra Angelico felt no such inner vexation of spirit.[66]

[66] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 12.

William's offstage ascent and fall are described by a crowd of Pilgrims and a young boy who sees the angel. The point that the visual symbol of Michael's cutting of the rope has been determined by William's own actions, not by God's vengeance as the chronicler speculated, is made explicit in the Prior's response to Theodatus's claim that the fall was divine judgment: 'I think we sometimes make disasters, and then call them miraculous judgments' (74). The Prior's judgment of Theodatus is ruthless:

> This is Thy sin: thou hast betrayed the work;
> Thou hast betrayed the Church; thou hast betrayed
> Christ, in the person of His fellow-man (75).

William is not the only character with a mortal sin to expiate.

When Sayers's friend Dorothy Rowe read the typescript she wrote: 'Oh, how comely it is and how reviving to the spirits of just men long oppressed to find a plot based on inexorable logic.'[67] As we have seen, logic is one of Sayers's distinguishing qualities, not only of a verbal kind but also in the construction of her fiction and her drama. William's disabling fall is a logical consequence of the preoccupations that distract him and his workers, with whom he shares the community of guilt instantiated by the Fall, from commitment to the good of the work. In a larger theological context William fails to acknowledge that although he is doing God's work, his own sinful nature permeates even that work. In terms of the typological narrative it is a woman who is the agent of his re-enactment of the Fall, and Sayers's interpretation of Genesis, here as in *The Just Vengeance*, is that the woman is driven by an intellectual thirst for knowledge. William's mortal sin, however, lies in the pride of claiming parity with God, and this emerges at the end of the play. At the end of Scene Three, as Sayers acknowledged in the letter to Babington quoted above, the audience may mistakenly assume that William is paying the penalty for his fleshly lusts.

Scene IV: The Eldest Sin of All

In the fourth and last part of the play the uncertainty the audience feels in identifying William's besetting sin is played out in a series of scenes in which William himself is prompted to dig increasingly deeply into his conscience, and the audience follows him in what becomes a hermeneutical process. Discussing the detective aspect of the

[67] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 22, note.

play with Irving, Sayers had pointed out that the historical outcome was well known and could not be used to create suspense, but in being forced to look elsewhere for an element of surprise she realised she could dramatise the confessional formula of self-examination, repentance and restitution with which the churchgoing members of her audience would already be familiar.[68] The formula served her well in subsequent plays, and in both *Zeal* and *The Devil to Pay* there is an element of mystery as the protagonists struggle to understand the nature of their sin.

William's progression towards *anagnorisis* and repentance is mediated by the Prior in the confessional followed by a vision in which William wrestles spiritually with the Archangel Michael. Theologically the process is also an examination of the nature of human work in relation to God's creation. Six months after William's fall he is clinging to the work on the continuing assumption that he is indispensable to it, directing progress with difficulty from his bed in the church, refusing Ursula's offer to marry and look after him, while a penitent Theodatus, who experienced his own *anagnorisis* in response to the Prior's rebuke in the previous scene, is willingly ministering to his needs. When William calls the Prior to make his confession the Prior accepts that William's lusts have not in themselves harmed the work and says that what seems to be irreparable 'God's grace shall turn to good' (91). William's immediate response is to describe how a mason let the chisel slip and he himself was able to rework the carving as a 'hippogriff' (91). As we shall see in *The Devil to Pay*, time's arrow can not be reversed and sins undone: *Zeal* is where Sayers formulates the proposition that the Fall can only be redeemed by a creative act.[69] The Prior reluctantly gives absolution, sensing that the confession is incomplete, while in the background the monastic choir is intoning the "Dies Irae".

What follows is a dream in which the Archangels surround his bed (Fig. 5, p. 81). Michael is his confessor and warns him of

> The sin that is so much a part of thee
> Thou know'st it not for sin (94).

implying that the sin was in the work itself. William's angry response, 'My work is mine; He shall not take it from me' (95), reveals a refusal to recognise that humans

[68] Discussed with Fr H.H. Kelly, *Letters Two*, 48.
[69] Sayers, *Mind*, 86.

do not create *ex nihilo*. Michael says, 'No; thou shalt lay it down of thine own free will' (95) and in the passage of *stichomythia* that follows, Michael's answer to William's every protestation is that Christ has been there before him, dying 'Frustrate, defeated, half His life unlived,/Nothing achieved' (97).

> Art thou more than God?
> Not God himself was indispensable,
> For lo! God died - and still His work goes on (98).

As the background choir sings 'Faithful Cross', John IV of Portugal's Good Friday hymn, William finally experiences *anagnorisis* and repentance:

> O, I have sinned. The eldest sin of all,
> Pride, that struck down the morning star from heaven
> Hath struck me down from where I sat and shone
> Smiling on my new world (98).

The reference to his 'new world' shows he realises that he has been thinking of himself as God, and the next words that he understands the implication of his repentance for the good of the work:

> Let me lie deep in hell,
> Death gnaw upon me, purge my bones with fire,
> But let my work, all that was good in me,
> All that was God, stand up and live and grow (99).

The final words of his confession anticipate the conclusion of *The Devil to Pay*, where Faustus chooses to glimpse paradise from hell rather than experience limbo.

> But if to the damned
> Be any mercy at all, O send Thy Spirit
> To blow apart the sundering flames, that I
> After a thousand years of hell, may catch
> One glimpse, one only, of the Church of Christ,
> The perfect work, finished, though not by me (99).

The visionary quality of William's repentance is also something Sayers repeated in her second Canterbury play. To the accompaniment of choral *preces* and responses Michael absolves William and the archangelic vision dissolves. William shouts for his attendants and proceeds to make reparation, asking them to take him to the Lady Ursula's lodging in acknowledgment of a love he is no longer too proud to accept,

and to entrust the completion of the cathedral to William the Englishman, who has 'a mounting spirit and great vision' (101). The play concludes with the singing of Abelard's vision of Heaven, "O quanta qualia", said to be Sayers's favourite hymn and expressing the completion of God's work in the heavenly Jerusalem, followed in the published version by Michael's speech to the audience about the Creative Idea, Energy and Power.

At Canterbury the play ended with the hymn, and in response to a question about why Sayers allowed Michael's speech to be cut, Pickering has said:

> I think the music with the retreat of the procession carrying William, coinciding with the tableau of angels, made a very stunning ending to a play. I can only assume that Harcourt Williams said, 'Well, now, look; that is the way to end a play. If you then have an exposition you are going to take it down onto a completely different level.'[70]

Pickering's view that Sayers benefited from having the Old Vic veteran as her director is undoubtedly persuasive.[71]

Sayers's Style in *The Zeal of Thy House*

In *Zeal* Sayers established two characteristics that continued throughout her career as a stage playwright: she sought to convey theological ideas through action rather than exposition, and she developed a distinctive and vigorous style: blank verse interspersed with colloquial prose for the Canterbury plays, and for *The Just Vengeance* a stress-based form of free verse. The change in her style when she moved beyond Canterbury, and the fact that her last play, *The Emperor Constantine,* is almost entirely in prose, suggest to me that Sayers was tuned in to changing expectations of drama in a way that Martin Browne, for instance, who commissioned a series of verse plays for the Mercury Theatre in the post-war years, was not. Commentators have questioned the originality and effectiveness of Sayers's style and I shall challenge this in the context of her independence from contemporary literary movements.

Sayers's aim to take theological concepts and show them in action is exemplified in *Zeal* by the architectural metaphor for both creation and salvation. Apart from

[70] Pickering, *1987 Proceedings*, 22.
[71] Pickering, *Drama*, 224.

thematic links with *Gaudy Night* there are also resonances with another of Sayers's detective novels, *The Nine Tailors*, where the church building, as we saw in Chapter Two, symbolises not only the practical salvation offered to the villagers of Fenchurch St Paul through its daily worship but also the Christian architecture of salvation, encompassing the Fall, Noah's Ark and finally the regenerative waters of baptism. The description of the angel roof in *The Nine Tailors* (p. 67 above) can be compared in its expression of upward spiritual aspiration with the cumulative excitement of William's vision for Canterbury:

> We all have our dreams, Hubert. Churches we shall never live to see. Arch shouldering arch, shaft, vault and keystone, window and arcading higher, and wider and lighter, lifting roof, tower, spire, into the vault of heaven – columns slender as lily-stalks – walls only a framework for the traceries – living fountains of stone – (41).

When William falls he is ascending to place the keystone in the central arch, a biblical symbol of Jesus's salvation.[72] For Sayers the act of creation is a meeting place for the human with the divine, and in the act of completing his architectural vision William makes that meeting impossible in his own soul because he has not given himself wholly to the service of the work. William's fall as he ascends to place the stone that locks the structure together evokes both the Garden of Eden and the Second Adam. In *The Nine Tailors* Sayers embodied the concept of Original Sin by making a group of people representing the whole community unwittingly responsible for a death which is expiated when the village church becomes an Ark; in *Zeal* the human crisis is interwoven with the building of the church to embody a demonstration of the importance of serving the work. This is an aspect of what Sayers later meant when she said that she had never found artistic truth and theological truth to be at variance. In each case the architecture of a church is part of the narrative and also lends itself to symbolic interpretation.

Pickering and Brabazon both note in passing that the theme of Sayers's play has something in common with Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Also of interest is the play's possible influence on William Golding's novel *The Spire*,[73] in which the dean of a medieval cathedral, based on Salisbury, is driven by an obsession to build a spire to

[72] 'The stone which the builders rejected has become the head stone in the corner' (Psalm 118.22, quoted by Jesus in Matthew 21.42).
[73] William Golding, *The Spire* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

unprecedented heights at the cost of the lives and sanity of several of the cathedral staff and workers. At the end of the book it is implied that the angelic vision which has been driving him is a symptom of the spinal tuberculosis that kills him on the last page, but at the same time the reader knows that Jocelin's destructive and delusive obsession has resulted in one of the great works of English architecture. Implicit in the book is the idea that the good of the work is something separate from the human cost of achieving it. In his biography of Golding John Carey has shown that when Golding was teaching in Salisbury in 1946 the school dramatic society put on a performance of *Zeal*, so it is almost certain that he knew the play.[74]

When Babington told Sayers that *The Zeal of Thy House* was the best play they had produced, this may have been partly a comment on the perceived difficulty of the verse in the preceding Eliot and Williams plays, exemplified in Charles Williams's *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, where the world is described in a characteristic passage as 'one/twirling twy-flash dazzle of soul and sun/down the hangman's way on the hangman's day'.[75] It is also the case that Sayers created characters with which the audience could readily identify, particularly in the love story between William and Ursula. As a novelist Sayers was a professional in the art of telling a story, and she carried the clarity of the novels into the 'flexible and natural'[76] blank verse of her drama, to quote a contemporary review of *Zeal*. Sayers's verse is not difficult in the sense of challenging the audience's understanding at a literal level, and could in fact be said to follow the spirit of her prose writings, 'A passage is not plain English – still less is it good English – if we are obliged to read it twice to find out what it means.'[77] I believe that Sayers's verse has a distinctive voice, incorporating changes of register that were carefully judged for their context, but whether this play can stand comparison with the Eliot and Williams plays for Canterbury has been debated by commentators. In 1986 Pickering took a negative view:

> The dramatic verse [...] has no character of its own and, although the voice of Harcourt Williams must have deceived many into thinking they were listening to sublime language, there is an indulgence in the writing which serves no dramatic purpose.[78]

---

[74] John Carey, *William Golding* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 250.
[75] Charles Williams, *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 48.
[76] "Canterbury Drama," *The Times Literary Supplement*, July 3, 1937, 493.
[77] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 82.
[78] Pickering, *Drama*, 237.

In this chapter I have argued that Sayers's verse is the medium for conveying complex ideas with clarity, even transparency, and I would suggest that Pickering's point that the verse may be seen as lacking its own character is a result of the fact that it is used throughout as an expository medium and is thus very different from the consciously difficult poetic styles of Eliot and Williams. Brabazon also takes a negative view, ascribing the play's success with audiences and reviewers to the fact that 'people who go to a play in a church or cathedral […] are seeking a spiritual experience, and the quality of the drama has very little to do with the fact that they often find one.'[79] This waspish comment, in which there is undoubtedly some truth, is in my view belied in the case of *Zeal* by the fact that the play toured successfully, attracting Saturday night audiences in commercial theatres.

According to the actor Robert Speaight (Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral* and Christ in *The Man Born to be King*):

> […political and religious dramas] tend to deal in absolutes and abstractions – that is their temptation as well as their opportunity – and they make it easy for the dramatist to neglect the abracadabra of naturalism.[80]

As I have tried to show, although Sayers does deal in 'absolutes and abstractions', at the same time the 'abracadabra of naturalism' is central to the dramatic logic of *Zeal*. If, as Laurence Irving hoped, the audience were to see it as a detective exercise, working out what William's sin really is, it was essential that the action and the arguments within the dialogue should be immediately comprehensible. The way the play is conceived dictates an avoidance of the kind of challenging poetic diction characteristic of most plays in the verse-drama movement. To balance this, Sayers's blank verse is muscular, argumentative and characterised by clarity, and this clarity enables it to move seamlessly between exposition and a more lyrical mode:

> WORKMAN Master Hubert says, is that rope ready?
> SIMON Here you are, mate.
> URSULA Do we presume too much upon God's mercy?
> WILLIAM We are the master-craftsmen, God and I – (67).

[79] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 164.
[80] Robert Speaight, *Drama Since 1939* (London: Longmans, Green for the British Council, 1947), 36.

Pickering finds some awkwardness in the changes of mode between the temporal and the transcendent,[81] and has himself directed a revival of the play in which the scenes with the Archangels were largely cut, but he has also praised Sayers's 'lovely shift in momentum' between prose and verse in the confession scene,[82] and Patrick McLaughlin admired 'the way in which she could pass easily from good prose to the magnificent verse that she wrote'.[83] It is also worth pointing out that William's speech 'We are the master-craftsmen', beautiful in itself, is not to be taken at face value. There is a sub-text in which his eloquence is in direct proportion to his hubris, and with this in mind the juxtaposition with the down-to-earth speech of the workmen can be seen as making a moral, even satirical, point. In all her plays Sayers uses changes in style to establish character and move the action on. The flexibility with which she handles the medium arguably makes her verse a highly appropriate form for the play's combination of the sacramental and hermeneutical.

Taking Rowan Williams's definition of 'modernist' art as having a primary concern with the 'fabric inner and outer of the work made',[84] rather than any external reference, it could be argued that Sayers's preoccupation with the theological correlation of dogma and drama constitutes a kind of modernism, and that in *Zeal* she found a form that emerged from the historical narrative in a way that fits Williams's definition. In the first scene William is chosen over two applicants who represent on the one hand a dishonest conservatism unlikely to meet the realities of the commission, and on the other a modernity designed to be a showcase for contemporary fashion (Fig. 4, p. 81). The implication of the Chapter's choice is that William produces something which does not depend for its value on competing ideologies of style but has its own integrity. Sayers was aware that the use of realism might be seen as running counter to the prevailing culture but she increasingly found it to be a necessary way of making an impact and wrote in her Introduction to *The Man Born*: 'Technically, the swiftest way to produce the desirable sense of shock, is the use in drama of modern speech and a determined historical realism about the characters.'[85] She wrote to Brother George Every: 'My feeling is that there is nothing

[81] Pickering, *Drama*, 238.
[82] Pickering, *1987 Proceedings*, 17.
[83] McLaughlin, *1987 Proceedings*, 24.
[84] Williams, *Grace*, 8.
[85] Sayers, *Man Born*, 23.

in itself wicked or inartistic about realism as such – only when it persists as a dead thing after the correspondence to the inner reality has ceased to be true.'[86]

It is my argument in this study that a striking aspect of Sayers's achievement was to develop a realism that maintains a close 'correspondence to the inner reality' of the theological architecture, and that she did so within a liturgical framework that points more explicitly towards that reality. It is arguable that the style of *The Zeal of Thy House* is dictated by the demands of her subject and the good of the work, and thus exemplifies what it describes; it unquestionably achieved the kind of success Sayers most valued in the fact that for a time it spoke of the eternal to paying audiences.

The Mind of the Maker: Idea, Energy, Power

The Impetus of Fr Kelly's Letters

The Festival theme of Arts and Crafts led Irving to ask Sayers to incorporate a plea 'that the people of Canterbury should look after their Cathedral'.[87] The plea was made in Michael's final speech on the Trinitarian nature of creative work, and although it was cut in the Canterbury performances and on tour, according to Barbara Reynolds it was restored in the revival of 1949.[88] The discarded speech became the starting point for Sayers's 1941 book on theological aesthetics, *The Mind of the Maker*. The speech is a *Te Deum*, the fourth century hymn of praise sung in the Anglican service of Matins and therefore a direct invitation to the audience to unite with the players in a final act of worship:

> Children of men, lift up your hearts. Laud and magnify God, the everlasting wisdom, the holy, undivided and adorable Trinity.
> Praise Him that He hath made man in His own image, a maker and craftsman like Himself, a little mirror of His triune majesty.
> For every work of creation is threefold, an earthly trinity to match the heavenly.
> First: there is the creative Idea; passionless, timeless, beholding the whole work complete at once, the end in the beginning; and this is the image of the Father.
> Second: there is the Creative Energy, begotten of that Idea, working in time from the beginning to the end, with sweat and passion, being incarnate in the bonds of matter; and this is the image of the Word.

[86] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 268.
[87] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 14.
[88] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 42.

> Third: there is the Creative Power, the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul; and this is the image of the indwelling Spirit.
> And these three are one, each equally in itself the whole work, whereof none can exist without the other; and this is the image of the Trinity.
> Look then upon this Cathedral Church of Christ: imagined by men's minds, built by the labour of men's hands, working with power upon the souls of men; symbol of the everlasting Trinity, the visible temple of God.
> As you would honour Christ, so honour His church; nor suffer this temple of His Body to know decay.[89]

In Chapter II of *Mind*, "The Image of God", Sayers suggests that the respect in which humankind is made in God's image in Genesis is in the power to create: 'The characteristic common to God and man is apparently that: the desire and the ability to make things.'[90] It was not until the published play became available later in the year that Fr H.H. Kelly, a founder of the religious community the Society of the Sacred Mission, wrote to Sayers asking, 'I wonder if you recognize, or are interested in recognizing, how closely your book images the principles of the Athanasian Creed – the two-fold necessity of faith in the trinity of God, and in the Incarnation.'[91]

Sayers's reply ran to around three thousand words and gets quickly to the point that 'The dogma of the Incarnation is the most dramatic thing about Christianity, and indeed, the most dramatic thing that ever entered into the mind of man; but if you tell people so, they stare at you in bewilderment,'[92] and she follows it up with the example of *Zeal*, saying that Laurence Irving 'thinks it's terrifically dramatic, but he cannot understand that Dogma IS the Drama.' These words gave Sayers a title for her *Sunday Times* article the following year,[93] and this first letter to Fr Kelly, closely followed by another two weeks later, outlines many of the ideas which were developed in *Mind*. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that Kelly's letter was the event that more than any other opened up the way to Sayers's career as a lay apologist.

---

[89] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 102-3.
[90] Sayers, *Mind*, 17.
[91] Quoted editorially by Barbara Reynolds in Sayers *Letters Two*, 42.
[92] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 43.
[93] Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Dogma is the Drama," in *Creed or Chaos? and other Essays in Popular Theology* (London: Methuen, 1947), 20-4.

Sayers answered Kelly's letter in five numbered points, the first of which concerns 'the speech about the Trinity'.[94] Although she says that it was not based on Augustine, this and the following letter show she is familiar with Augustine's *De Trinitate*.

> St Augustine says that God, in making Man, made an image of the triune. I am trying to say that man (made a craftsman in the image of the Master-craftsman) in making a work of art presents also an image of the Triune, because "*every work of creation*" is three-fold. [...] (a) *The Book as You Think It*, which I have called the Idea [...] a timeless sort of thing with no distinguishable parts [...] (b) *The Book as You Write It* [...] This I have called the Energy [...] The Energy produces [...] a visible 'incarnation' of the book in material form, but it exists before that and goes on after, so that it and the Idea co-exist inevitably and are still the same book. [...] (c) *The Book as You and They Read It* [...] I have called it the Power [...] it is the thing that you give out to your readers and your readers give back to you [...] so that there is a perpetual exchange of Power going on. [...] So that your book comes back to you, as it were from the minds to which it is addressed – still the same book, but with a different personality.[95]

The unity of the Trinity in the Augustinian tradition is essential to Sayers's ideas about the integrity of a work of art:

> [...] how can we know that the Idea itself has any real existence apart from the Energy? Very strangely; by the fact that the Energy itself is conscious of referring all its acts to an existing and complete whole. In theological terms, the Son does the will of the Father.[96]

Sayers placed great emphasis on the dynamic process by which the parts are constantly referred to the whole: in her 1944 lecture, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" the faculty of recognition links the sign and referent and is central to the act of creation: Sayers imagines that the poet 'says to himself: "Yes – that is right. That is the experience the full moon was to me. I recognise it in expressing it, and now I know what it was." [...] the thing reveals itself to him in words and so becomes fully experienced for the first time.'[97] The recognition inherent in the act of creation may apply also to God, however different the conditions of his activity:

> [...] let us ask in what way God creates. Christian theology replies that God, who is a Trinity, creates by, and through, his Second Person, his Word or

[94] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 44.
[95] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 45-6.
[96] Sayers, *Mind*, 27.
[97] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 39.

> Son, who is continually begotten from the First person, the Father, in an external creative activity. And certain theologians have added this very significant comment: the Father, they say, is known only to himself by beholding his image in his Son.[98]

The dynamic in which the transformed Idea is returned to its source by the Power through the Energy lies behind Sayers' rejection of the concept of mimesis as an adequate description of the artistic process. In watching the *Agamemnon*, we realise:

> It is bigger and more real than the real-life action that it represents. That a false wife should murder a husband – that might be a paragraph in the *News of the World* or a thriller to read on the train – but when it is shown to us like this, by a great poet, it is as though we went behind the triviality of the actual event to the significance behind it [...] This play is not anything that ever happened in this world – it is something happening in the mind of Aeschylus, and it had never happened before [...] The true work of art, then, is something *new*.[99]

Sayers claims that the idea of the work of art as something new, art as creation rather than imitation, was 'the one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics'.[100]

The Limits of Analogy

In *Zeal*, Sayers dramatises a debate about the implications of the proposition that the human artist's work reflects God's work as Creator. When William claims to be necessary to God's work he is locating himself outside the pattern of dependence whereby human creativity constantly generates something new by using God's materials. In practice the critical tool of analogy preserves the necessary distinction between human and divine and is at the same time reconcilable with the experience of continuity. Analogy is central to the Trinitarian theory of *Mind*: ' "God created" [...] this, we may say, is a metaphor like other statements about God. So it is, but it is none the worse for that. All language about God must, as St Thomas Aquinas pointed out, necessarily be analogical' (17). One of the book's earliest reviewers was C.S. Lewis, who reviewed it for *Theology* in October 1941. Lewis welcomed the book's premise, expressing surprise that 'the image of author and book for the relation between God and the world, though popular among the Stoics, has been so little used

[98] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[99] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 36.
[100] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.

by the Christians.'[101] He recognises that to use an analogy is to invite critics to point to the differences between the things compared, 'to which the only reply seems to be "Quite!"', but goes on to do so himself. 'I think that in an age when idolatry of human genius is one of our most insidious dangers Miss Sayers would have been prudent to stress more continuously than she does the fact that the analogy *is* merely an analogy [...] that an unbridgeable gulf yawns between the human activity of re-combining elements from a pre-existing world and the Divine activity of first inventing, and then endowing with substantial existence, the elements themselves. All the "creative" artists of the human race cannot so much as summon up the phantasm of a single new primary colour or a single new dimension.'[102] The upshot is that Lewis must 'disagree with Miss Sayers very profoundly when she says that "between the mind of the maker and the Mind of his Maker" there is "a difference, not of category, but only of quality and degree"'. Lewis claims that Sayers is using the comparison univocally rather than analogically.

A few years later Sayers addressed Lewis's point in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic":

> [...] we say that God created the universe 'out of nothing' – he was bound by no conditions of any kind. Here there can be no comparison; the human artist is *in* the universe and bound by its conditions. He can create only within that framework and out of the material that the universe supplies.[103]

Sayers meets Lewis's objection by making it clear that there is 'no comparison' between the conditions of creation for God or humans; but the logical consequence of this, that human creation can use only the materials and methods that God has created, opens the way for the 'continuation' argument: if God's materials are the only ones to hand, human work is necessarily in one sense a continuation, however different the conditions. Or to look at it another way, an artist's creation may be new within the human world but already exist in the mind of God.

Sayers's position is in line with Neo-Scholastic theory, which as we have seen was dismissed by the more Protestant Lewis. In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain explicitly

---

[101] C.S. Lewis, "The Mind of the Maker," review of *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *Theology* 43, no. 256, October 1941, 248-9.
[102] Lewis, "The Mind of the Maker," 248.
[103] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions,* 37.

described human creativity as a continuation of God's, and, as in Coleridge, there is the idea of human creation as a second layer of a unified activity.

> Art, then, is fundamentally constructive and creative. It is the faculty of producing, not of course *ex nihilo*, but out of a pre-existing matter, a new creature, an original being capable in its turn of moving a human soul. [...The artist] is as it were an associate of God in the making of works of beauty; by developing the faculties with which the Creator has endowed him [...] and making use of created matter, he creates, as it were, in the second degree. *Operatio artis fundatur super operationem naturae, et haec super creationem*. (*Summa theol.,* I, 45, 8.) Artistic creation does not copy God's creation, but continues it.[104]

Maritain's belief that art is continuous with God's creation is set against mimesis, the copying of creation, a term implying a fictive element regarded by puritans and iconoclasts as involving pretence or deception. Maritain claims a Thomist basis for his alternative proposition, that in its character as a reworking of material supplied by God all art is by definition a continuation of God's work, with humans as co-workers. The terms of the proposition may owe something to the role of Wisdom as a fellow-worker in Proverbs 8.30 ('Then I was beside him, like a master worker' in the New Revised Standard Version). Sayers's argument in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" that Christianity replaced the concept of mimesis with that of the image is close to Maritain's thesis. As we saw in Chapter Two, Coleridge addressed the relation between human and divine creativity by the use of the word 'echo' in which the 'secondary Imagination' differs from the primary in degree and mode of operation. It may be compared with Tolkien's 'Secondary World' in which the artist is a 'sub-creator': '[...] we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and the likeness of a Maker.'[105]

The Mind of the Maker is a major contribution to the theological aesthetics of the mid-twentieth-century, comparable in importance with more famous works such as Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Sayers saw the Bridgeheads series, of which this was the first and most significant, as a contribution to the war effort, and its examination of how people can in reality do good in the world is far from the facile moralising that was too often expected of her as an apologist. To quote from

---

[104] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 48.

[105] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy Stories" (1939), in *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), 56.

Ann Loades's discussion of *Mind*: '[...] if our dignity as images of God is to be respected, then social, political and economic life must be so ordered that persons can express their creativity and so fulfil their human nature.'[106]

Conclusion

Zeal has attracted more comment than Sayers's other plays but there have been misconceptions. It is not the case that Michael executes God's justice: as we have seen, he and the other Archangels are agents of the choices humans make. The dismissal of William as wicked by a number of commentators is harder to explain. William takes bribes, but he puts the money back into the budget. He has a mistress, but the play makes it clear that he loves her, and readers of Sayers's detective stories will know that her hero and heroine have both had lovers and are not condemned by the author. In spite of this, in 1940 George Kernodle spoke of William's 'dissolute private life',[107] while a number of later commentators take it for granted that the author disapproves of William's lust and taking commissions. 'William [...] proceeds to cheat the Chapter's monks of monies, to engage in sexual liaisons, and to ruthlessly pursue glorification of himself as the master craftsman.'[108] In fact, seen in context, his two main sins are modified by generosity of spirit, and the fact that he was played by Harcourt Williams is a guarantee of his appeal to the audience. Early in the play, as we have seen, the Archangels are weighing William's faults and Raphael says his 'work shall speak/And save the workman' (38). William's possessive attitude to the work comes close to damning him, but he finally finds the humility and generosity to let it go.

The play's anonymous TLS reviewer got it exactly right:

> Sins of the flesh, by all means, and plenty of them, in this swaggering, full-blooded lover of beauty, and wrath, greed, even dishonesty, so long as his work is not impaired by it […] the conflict is only resolved when William suddenly becomes conscious that his true sin had been one of the soul, the arrogance which claimed the work for his own, not God's, and denied God's ability to carry it on without him. Miss Sayers has a sure eye for dramatic effect and a sure hand in making it good.[109]

---

[106] Ann Loades, "Dorothy L. Sayers: War and Redemption," in *C.S. Lewis and Friends*, ed. David Hein and Edward Henderson (London: SPCK, 2011), 64.
[107] George R. Kernodle, "England's Religious-Drama Movement," *College English* vol. 1, no. 5 (February 1940): 414-26.
[108] Donahoe, "Sacramental Aesthetic," 78.
[109] "Canterbury Drama," July 3, 1937, 493.

The same reviewer praises Sayers for not allowing herself to be stereotyped by Eliot's example at Canterbury, and for the fact that her prose is 'rhythmical and alive' and her verse 'flexible and natural'. Sayers was perhaps never again to combine style and substance so seamlessly.

In her first Canterbury play Sayers took as her central theme the imperative on the worker to serve the good of the work, using the work of the creative artist as a paradigm for all work. The theme had been implicit in some of the novels and with *Zeal* it became a conscious preoccupation; Sayers herself referred to it using the term 'integrity'. The work of the creative artist also becomes a paradigm for the human maker's relationship with the divine Maker, both in *Zeal* and in *The Mind of the Maker*. This is possible in the first place because the Incarnation has divinised the whole of life, making every object and action a potential source of sacramental revelation. The participative sacramental process is activated by the worker's creativity: in making something new, using God-given materials, the creator has constantly to serve the good of the work by relating the parts to the whole, and this process reflects God's dynamic work in creation. In *Zeal*, William does serve the work itself with integrity, but he forgets that his materials come from God and that he himself is not an isolated worker but a member of a working community.

Zeal focuses the debate whether the human artist's work is continuous or analogous with God's work as Creator, and this resonates with the wider contemporary division between theologies of transcendence and immanence. As in her theoretical writings, the outcome is that in practice the critical tool of analogy is reconcilable with the experience of continuity. The Prior suggests that the work of the craftsman reconciles the two approaches: 'Truth is glorious; but there is one/Glory of the sun, another of the moon,/And all the truth of the craftsman is in his craft.'[110] When William claims to be necessary to God's work he is locating himself outside the pattern of dependence whereby human creativity generates something new by using God's materials. This is a perversion of the 'continuation' theory of creativity and embodies what critics of that theory feared as the inevitable outcome. William finally comes to accept the model of continuation incorporating a difference in kind and degree, which allows William the Englishman to 'build a harmony of his and mine/To a

[110] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 59.

nobler close than mine' (101). Thus *Zeal* embodies a critique of the debate on the link between divine and human creativity.

In Sayers's Canterbury plays the intimacy of the Chapter House setting and the necessity of some entrances to be made through the audience created a participatory channel for the audience which at its most basic level is common to all intimate theatre. The context of an ecclesiastical building connects the experience of theatre with that of worship, encouraging a response to the building and to the liturgical elements within the play. The protagonist's *anagnorisis* is mediated by the sacrament of confession within the play, a process with which the audience would be familiar, and just as the Church's formal sacraments need to be validated by the presence of a congregation, so drama does not become theatre without participatory witnesses who are themselves engaged in the never-ending process of referring the parts to the whole and sending the Energy back to the Idea through the Power. For Sayers the generativity inherent in the act of creating something produces David Jones's 'without-endness', with the Holy Spirit as a way in and out of the circle as the actors and audience in a drama make it part of their own story. Sayers's drama not only takes the sacrament of work, particularly creative work, as its subject, but it initiates sacramental participation by the audience in the dramatic process itself.

Chapter Four

The Mind of the Maker and *The Devil to Pay*

The Devil to Pay was the Canterbury Festival play in 1939, only two years after *The Zeal of Thy House*, and this second commission is further evidence of the contemporary success of *Zeal*. We have seen how the basic premise of *The Mind of the Maker* in 1941 evolved from the final speech of *Zeal*; Chapter VII of *Mind* develops the theme of the nature of evil which Sayers had already explored dramatically in *The Devil to Pay*.

The Mind of the Maker: 'Maker of Ill Things'?

The Devil to Pay is Sayers's reworking of the Faust story, and the first epigraph to Chapter VII of *The Mind of the Maker*, entitled "Maker of All Things – Maker of Ill Things", quotes from the closing scene:

> FAUSTUS Who made thee?
> MEPHISTOPHELES God; as the light makes the shadow.
> FAUSTUS Is God, then, evil?
> MEPHISTOPHELES God is only light,
> And in the heart of the light no shadow standeth,
> Nor can I dwell within the light of heaven
> Where God is all.
> FAUSTUS What art thou, Mephistopheles?
> MEPHISTOPHELES I am the price that all things pay for being,
> The shadow on the world, thrown by the world
> Standing in its own light, which light God is.[1]

The second epigraph quotes Charles Williams on the subject of evil as privation. Following Aquinas and Augustine, Williams says that God knows evil 'by simple intelligence' rather than by experience, and 'it is therefore part of that knowledge that He should understand good in its deprivation, the identity of heaven in its opposite identity of hell, but without "approbation", without calling it into being at all' (75).[2]

---

[1] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941 (ninth edition, 1947)), 75. The epigraph does not appear in all editions. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
[2] Charles Williams, *He Came Down from Heaven* (1938) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), 17.

A discussion of the origins of evil may on the face of it have little direct relevance to Sayers's thesis that creativity is Trinitarian in structure, but in fact this section of *Mind* is pivotal to the wider discussion of art as a process. The previous chapter concluded by saying that 'no consideration of false reverence should prevent us from subjecting the incarnations of creators to the severest tests of examination [...] If the structure is truly knit, it will stand any strain, and prove its truth by its toughness' (74). As we have already seen, Sayers justified the project of dramatising theological ideas by saying that a work of art which has integrity will itself critique its subject matter. In *Mind* Sayers examines this principle in practice, and from Chapter VII to the end of the book she applies the Trinitarian model to what she designates 'evil' in the aesthetic sphere, using things that can go wrong in writing as a paradigm of existential evil, for instance an imbalance in the Trinitarian parts that constitute the whole. I shall suggest that in developing the analogy in the aesthetic sphere Sayers does not always maintain a distinction between potential and actual evil, but that this does not affect her overall argument.

Sayers explicitly excludes moral considerations from her discussion of the Trinitarian paradigm in *Mind*, but as we saw in Chapter Two, there is in fact a paradigmatic continuity between aesthetic and moral choices. In both cases a wrong choice cuts off the flow of Energy, the power of realising the artist's Idea, from the Idea itself so that in time it can only be redeemed with increasing difficulty. We have seen this at work in *Zeal* and I shall argue that this is what happens to Faustus in *The Devil to Pay*. In a quest to alleviate suffering he creates an illusory world with Mephistopheles's connivance, and finds himself unable to address real suffering. In *Art and Scholasticism* Maritain identifies Art and Prudence as operating in parallel for different moral ends, one for the good of the work itself and the other for the good of the person.[3] It is probable but not certain that Maritain's distinction may have been in Sayers's mind in the writing of this chapter of *Mind*: although she was reading Maritain in 1941[4] it is not until January 1943 that she mentions this work in particular: 'You will find the whole question of the *finis operis* and the *finis operantis* fully discussed in *Art and Scholasticism* by Jacques Maritain.'[5] In *Mind* she will consider the concept of evil in the context of the act of creation, where 'good' means good craftsmanship, beauty is artistic beauty and truth is structural

[3] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 12.
[4] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 256.
[5] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 384.

truth. ‘Is there, then, within then terms of our analogy, any sense in which we can say that a good writer is the creator of artistic evil – or artistic “wrongness”?’ (78).

In spite of the distinction between artistic and moral ends, in *The Devil to Pay* Faustus’s artistic wrongness is ultimately inseparable from moral wrongness, and the following discussion will evaluate Sayers's application of the word ‘evil’ to artistic failures or distortions, asking if it provides an adequate paradigm for evil in the world. Sayers bases her literary paradigm of evil on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, arguing that the existence of *Hamlet* immediately creates a category of ‘not-Hamlet’.

> Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*. That act of creation enriches the world with a new category of Being, namely: *Hamlet*. But simultaneously it enriches the world with a new category of Not-Being, namely: Not-Hamlet […] the whole of the past immediately and automatically becomes Not-Hamlet (81).

‘Not-Hamlet’ is a neutral category containing within itself the possibility that someone will give it ‘approbation’, an act of will converting it into ‘Anti-Hamlet’, an entity that is actively antagonistic to *Hamlet*. The example Sayers gives is Garrick’s rewriting of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* to give it a happy ending. Once this has been done it exists in the world and cannot be undone, but Garrick’s alternative *Hamlet* can be redeemed within the material world, for instance by ridiculing it and thus restoring a sense of what the real *Hamlet* is: in a Trinitarian sense, returning the flow of Energy to its source.

There are two problems with Sayers’s discussion: first, there are inconsistencies in her use of terminology, and secondly, the appropriateness of the literary analogy is open to challenge. With regard to the terms of her discussion, ‘Not-Hamlet’ is initially described by Sayers in terms of the potentiality that any creation opens up. She goes on to say: ‘So long as Not-Being remains negative and inactive, it produces no particular effects, harmful or otherwise. But if Not-Hamlet becomes associated with consciousness and will, we get something which is not merely Not-Hamlet: we get Anti-Hamlet […] The creative will, free and active like God, is able to will Not-Being into Being, and thus produce an Evil which is no longer negative but positive. This, according to the ancient myth of the Fall, is what happened to Men’ (82). Sayers is expanding the Charles Williams epigraph, that God understood the deprivation of good intellectually, ‘by simple intelligence’, without the ‘approbation’, the act of will, which would call it into being, and in the literary

analogy she distinguishes between potential and actual evil. This passage, however, follows one in which the neutral category of 'Not-Hamlet' is translated into general philosophical terms as 'Not-Good' and described in a way that seems to equate it with realised Evil: 'the Good, by merely occurring, automatically and inevitably creates its corresponding Evil. In this sense, therefore, God, Creator of all things, creates Evil as well as Good, because the creation of a category of Good necessarily creates a category of Not-Good' (81). In this passage, introducing the concept of evil as privation, Sayers is failing to apply the Hamlet-metaphor she goes on to develop, since that posits an intermediate neutral stage of potentiality for evil which may not be realised by means of 'approbation'. Rather than applying the paradigm beyond its limits, something she criticised elsewhere, she is in fact failing to apply its distinctions in full.

Over and above Sayers's inconsistencies, however, is the question of whether a literary illustration is appropriate for the development of the paradigm. While it is philosophically the case that *Hamlet* creates a category of Not-Hamlet, in *Mind* the identification of that with potential evil and its realisation in Anti-Hamlet depends for its validity on the idea that any completed work of art automatically creates a category of 'rightness' against which all modifications or developments have to be judged as 'wrong'. 'At a particular point in this creative act [the poet] selects the "right" word for a particular place in the poem [...] the very act of choosing that one "right" word, automatically and necessarily makes every other word in the dictionary a "wrong" word.' (82-3). A possible objection is that there could be other words just as effective which might equally be designated 'right'. For example, the poet Hugo Williams has recently described writing two poems on the same theme and in the same form. 'By using different words to write the same poem I would be changing its meaning in unforeseen ways and might end up saying something about the workings of poetry itself […] When poetry is going well it feels like a kind of research.'[6] For the postmodern reader the concept of the right word may be meaningless: the rightness of a word could simply reside in the fact that the poet chose it, and even if we accept that the idea for a poem can exist independently of its expression, the choice of the word may itself be said to have a role in shaping the idea from which it springs. Sayers denies Platonic idealism elsewhere but here it seems to be a ghostly presence. 'He is free, if he chooses, to call all or any of those

[6] Hugo Williams, *The Times Literary Supplement*, March 20, 2009, 16.

wrong words into active being in his poem […] But the perfect poet does not do so, because his will is subdued to his Idea, and to associate it with the wrong word would be to run counter to the law of his being' (83).

Sayers was writing before the late twentieth century popularisation of alternative endings, for instance Bantam Books' children's series *Choose Your Own Adventure*, or John Fowles's novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, but in *Mind* she discusses Dickens's plotting indecisions in some detail (*Mind*, 59-60), and she is likely to have known Dickens's alternative endings for *Great Expectations*. On these grounds, therefore, we might ask why the category of Not-Hamlet should be used to illustrate potential evil and further whether Garrick's rewriting of *Hamlet*, described by Sayers as the approbation of Not-Hamlet to create Anti-Hamlet, should be regarded as a paradigmatic realisation of evil antagonistic to the original Hamlet. An alternative view might be that it adds to *Hamlet* rather than replaces it, and it might further be objected that historically speaking Garrick's huge popularity as an actor introduced audiences to Shakespeare where otherwise they might have had no knowledge of *Hamlet*. As we have seen, Sayers did not elsewhere regard a book's ultimate meaning as lodged with the author, and even in *Mind* her discussion of *Hamlet* in Chapter VIII sees the work as the focus of accumulated meanings. Chapter VII, then, on the question of whether God is the 'Maker of Ill Things', is an attempt to develop the Trinitarian paradigm in a way that is at odds with the rest of the book. Three years later, in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic", Sayers placed emphasis on a work of art as a new thing, adopting a more open-ended approach to creativity in line with Maritain's exposition of generativity as the key to understanding God's work in creation. The Trinitarian analogy, however, remained important for the theology of the sacramental event in which the human most closely encounters the divine.

In *Mind* Sayers expounds a theology based on the Augustinian view that Evil originates in a deprivation of Good, and on Aquinas where God knows evil intellectually but human will calls it into actual existence. In doing so she draws on the fact that she had recently sought to embody these ideas in a full-length play about the Faust legend, and she also refers to the dramatic versions by Marlowe and Goethe. Marlowe's Faustus, Sayers points out, bids 'oncaymeon' (*on kai me on*, 'being and not-being') farewell (78; *Dr Faustus*, Act 1, scene 1). In Marlowe the expression is symbolic of the system of academic philosophy Faustus is leaving

behind, but for Sayers in *The Devil to Pay* 'on kai me on' is identified with the definition of evil as privation, 'the shadow on the world, thrown by the world/Standing in its own light, which light God is'.[7] This metaphor is pervasive throughout *The Devil to Pay,* symbolising not only the privation theory of evil but also Faustus's failure to understand it. The effectiveness of the metaphor within its dramatic context signals the fact that when Sayers is on what she regarded as her own ground, the embodying of theological ideas through dramatic action, her multi-layered verse obviates the need to make sharp philosophical distinctions.

A phrase used repeatedly by Sayers in *The Devil to Pay* is 'knowing good as evil', reminiscent of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'Evil, be thou my good' (Book IV, 110). Later in the play she identifies 'knowing good as evil' with the sin against the Holy Ghost and she seems to have thought its meaning self-explanatory. In a lecture to the Goethe Society in 1945 on the Faust legend she said:

> The *possibility* of evil exists from the moment that a creature is made that can love and do good because it chooses and not because it is unable to do anything else. The *actuality* of evil exists from the moment that that choice is exercised in the wrong direction. Sin (moral evil) is the deliberate choice of not-God. And pride, as the Church has consistently pointed out, is the root of it: i.e. the refusal to accept the creaturely status; the making of the *difference* between self and God into an antagonism against God. Satan, as Milton rightly shows, 'thinks himself impaired,' and in that moment he chooses that evil shall be his good.[8]

Knowing good as evil, then, starts with the perception that God's will is a personal threat and then extends to hatred of everything that is of God, that is anything good. In a point that she made repeatedly throughout her life, deriving from an early interest in the Athanasian Creed, Sayers goes on to say that 'God does not (in the monstrous old-fashioned phrase) "send" anybody to hell; hell is that state of the soul in which its choice becomes obdurate and fixed.'[9] She would expand this theme in the introduction to the Dante translation: '[Hell] is the condition to which the soul reduces itself by a stubborn determination to evil, and in which it suffers the torment

---

[7] Sayers, *The Devil to Pay* (1939), *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 207. Further references from this edition will be given in the text.

[8] Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Faust Legend and the Idea of the Devil," published posthumously in *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 230.

[9] Sayers, *Search and Statement*, 230.

of its own perversion';[10] and in the notes on Judas in *The Man Born*: 'He goes on, down and down to the lowest pit of all, where sits the devil of pride that makes the sin unforgivable because the sinner resents and hates and refuses the forgiveness.'[11]

The reservations I have expressed relating to Sayers's use of literary analogy in *Mind* do not necessarily invalidate the point of the analogy, which lies in support for the statement 'Nor was there any way by which he could possibly make the Good without making the Evil as well' (83), where evil is understood in terms of literary choices. Sayers insists that the Anti-Hamlets can be redeemed. 'We must not [...] try to behave as though the Fall had never occurred nor yet say that the Fall was a Good Thing in itself.[12] But we may redeem the Fall by a creative act' (86). Theologically speaking, the paradigmatic creative act is the Incarnation: 'The Evil having been experienced, it could only be redeemed within the medium of experience' (86). God can know evil as Not-Being, that is, without bringing it into existence, but the Fall means that 'men, not being pure intelligences, but created within a space-time framework, could not "know" Evil as Not-Being – they could only "know" it by […] calling it into active being' (82). Faustus tries to know evil without experiencing it by going back to the time before the Fall, but the play demonstrates that once evil is a reality in the world it can not be denied. Sayers's insistence on redemption in the material world as the only way out of evil is central to *The Devil to Pay* and also to the way theology works out in her subsequent plays. When Faustus seeks to sidestep the consequences of the Fall with disastrous results, Sayers is mapping a way forward for her future protagonists. She was well aware of the importance of this theme in her work, and in 1943 wrote to a correspondent who had read *The Man Born to be King* without enthusiasm: '[...] if you continue to think that there is some way round, so as to cut out Calvary, you will not find it [...]. You will still come to Calvary with God, but you will be Gestas and not Dysmas [the repentant thief], and will die swearing and sneering at God instead of going into Paradise with Him.'[13]

[10] Sayers, *Hell*, 68.
[11] Sayers, *Man Born*, 263.
[12] Sayers seems to have accepted the concept of *felix culpa* when she said in her Goethe lecture, '*O felix culpa*! The sin of Adam is the occasion of the Incarnation' (*Search and Statement*, 235).
[13] "The Gospel is a thing of terror," in Sayers, ed. Bray, *Christ of the Creeds*, 79.

The Devil to Pay

The rise of Fascism in the thirties prompted a number of writers to turn to literary parables in order to comment on contemporary events. British stage censorship precluded the direct mention of any heads of state, and Steve Nicholson has described how a play indicting Nazism was granted a licence in 1934 following a requirement that it should be rewritten with a Ruritanian setting, only for the licence to become subject to an attempted revocation in 1938.[14] A playwright who wanted to say something about the contemporary world had to do so obliquely. In 1939 Eliot reworked themes from Aeschylus's Oresteia in *The Family Reunion* and Sayers reworked the Faust legend in *The Devil to Pay*. In different ways, both plays addressed the nature of evil in individual lives and its place in a God-given world.[15]

The *Faustbuch* of 1587, translated into English in 1592, was the basis of the Faust-story for Marlowe and Goethe.[16] It conflated a variety of tales about a devilish pact, and a modern commentator has remarked that 'all the major works in the long Faust tradition are untidy.'[17] This is to some extent true of the episodic structure of *The Devil to Pay*. Sayers was familiar with the versions by Marlowe and Goethe and had also absorbed Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the Shakespearean plays dealing with pacts and damnation, particularly *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, but in the play's Introduction she says: 'To endeavour to do again what greater poets have already magnificently done would be folly as well as presumption; and I have tried to offer a new presentment of Faustus' (112-13). Sayers's 'new presentment' is a Faustus who bargains for the alleviation of human suffering without personal cost, attempting to sidestep the redemption through suffering offered by the Cross. The embodiment of theology in action was central to *The Zeal of Thy House* and Sayers undoubtedly sought to achieve the same synthesis with her second Canterbury play. As with *Zeal*, she found a visual and symbolic way of doing this: Faustus's contracted soul becomes that of an animal, which appears live on stage, with the implication that his human soul exists elsewhere and can be retrieved. Sayers follows Goethe by saving Faustus from certain damnation in a tradition probably originating

---

[14] Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama* 1900-1968, vol. 2 1933-1952 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), 11-16.

[15] Spanos notes that Harry's return to Wishwood is an attempt to cancel guilt by going back to his childhood (*Verse Drama*, 195). We may compare this with Faustus's return to a prelapsarian state.

[16] Sayers first read Goethe's *Faust* at school in 1910. Sayers, *Letters One*, 49.

[17] Alice K. Turner, *The History of Hell* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 166.

with Lessing, though Lessing's manuscripts were, perhaps conveniently, lost on a coach journey. Reputedly Lessing's Faust fell into a slumber while devils corrupted a phantom in his stead, an interesting solution with some similarities to Sayers's, though there is no published evidence that she was aware of this version.[18]

The Devil to Pay is in four scenes with different geographical locations, each of which represents an aspect of Faustus's mental and spiritual progress. Wittenberg, named by Shakespeare as Hamlet's university town, was in the sixteenth century the home of the Protestant Reformers Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon, and in this play it represents the possibility of pursuing knowledge beyond the boundaries prescribed by the Catholic Church. Sayers's Faustus shares the Reformers' goal of transforming lives but rather than doing it by, for instance, conferring power with a vernacular Bible, he uses magic arts to retain control and change lives according to his own preconceptions. In the second scene, as a foretaste of what he will enjoy if he signs a pact with Mephistopheles, Faustus goes to Rome, where he challenges the Pope's perceived acquiescence in the suffering of the poor. Rome is the locus of the potentiality for evil that Faustus has not yet realised by 'approbation' and the Pope's response, discussed below, is that Faustus has not yet reached the point of calling good evil and evil good and can still be saved. At the end of the scene Faustus makes his decision and returns to Wittenberg for the pact. In Scene Three Innsbruck, a seat of the Holy Roman Emperors, is the place where Faustus's corruption is complete as he supports the Emperor in his war with the Pope and then finds himself paradoxically losing the material things for which he made the pact. Finally in the Court of Heaven his case is heard, and I shall suggest that it is possible to locate this final scene within Faustus's own soul.

The time gap between Faustus's initial conjuring of Mephistopheles and his commitment to the pact, which Sayers found in her sources, is exploited in *The Devil to Pay* to emphasize the important theological point that evil which exists as a potentiality has to be brought into existence by 'approbation', a conscious act of will on Faustus's part. The Pope's serious efforts to persuade Faustus to turn back underline in thematic terms Sayers's commitment to the Catholic Church as the community within which salvation is offered; in terms of Sayers's literary analogy,

[18] Elizabeth M. Butler, *The Fortunes of Faust* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998(1952)), 121-2.

Faustus's mind is in the intermediate state of Not-Good that can only be converted to Anti-Good, or Evil, by an act of will.

Scene I: Wittenberg

The play opens in Wittenberg, a place of intellectual enquiry, where Faustus's assistant Wagner is preparing for the big conjuration, assisted by Lisa, the Gretchen-figure. Sayers's Faustus is initially driven by compassion in his quest to change the world: 'When I see how ill this world is governed, and all the wretchedness that men suffer, I would give my immortal soul to be done with it all' (125). To Lisa he expresses the hope that 'magical power can aid me to resolve the mystery of wickedness, lay bare the putrefying sore at the heart of creation, break and remake the pattern of the inexorable stars' (127). Faustus is seeking not his own power, as in the mainstream tradition, but knowledge of the place of evil in the pattern of creation in order to break it. Faustus thus sets himself up as God's equal, as did William of Sens, and only in the last scene does he realise that by doing so he has himself called evil into being by giving 'approbation' to the potentiality inherent in God's creation of good.

Mephistopheles appears from Hell-mouth 'in the form of a lion with the tail of a serpent and the feet of a bull' (130). The play was written for Canterbury Cathedral Chapter House, with Irving's fixed set supplemented by a Hell-mouth stage right and a gazebo representing heaven opposite. As a sketch in the published version makes clear (Fig. 7, p. 119), stations in the centre represented the play's intermediate locations, but according to Pickering they were not used as playing areas because the space did not allow it.[19] The set thus recalls the medieval mystery and morality plays, in which movement between the stations may represent life's journey.[20] The audience's enjoyment depends throughout the play on a process of anticipation in which they understand better than Faustus what is going on, and the first few pages of dialogue establish by implication what Mephistopheles's nature really is. Faustus dismisses Wagner and says:

---

[19] Pickering, *Drama*, 241.

[20] John Parker says of *Everyman*: '[...] the universal individual probably progresses from one side of life's stage, where Goods are heaped and impotent, to the other side, where Good Deeds lie – equally low and corrupted but capable of rejuvenation by a systematic undertaking of the sacraments.' John Parker, *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), 100.

> FAUSTUS And thou, Mephistopheles, put off this ugly shape, fit only to frighten children. Stand before me in the semblance of a man.
> MEPHISTOPHELES With pleasure. Nothing easier. (*He takes off his lion's-head and tosses it negligently into Hell-mouth*.) And now, sir, what can I do for you, to justify the expenditure of so many big words and this great exhibition of fi-fo-fum? (131).

By throwing his lion's head into Hell-mouth Mephistopheles is announcing that the play is a reworking of the traditional elements in the Faustus-story that will penetrate below the surface of the folk-tale, whereas in Marlowe's play Mephistophilis assumes the guise of a friar as a response to Faustus's distaste. The gesture of Sayers's Mephistopheles also signals what the results of probing below the surface are going to be. Evil is mundane, everyday: Mephistopheles is a man who makes light of conjuration and can have a conversation with his student, though he retains the cloven hoof. Faustus here conjures Mephistopheles in the name of God as well as Lucifer, unlike Marlowe's Faustus who abjures God, but expectation is subverted when Mephistopheles says to Faustus, 'That name [God] is powerful only because you believe in its power. Believe in your own power, and you can command me without any tricks of conjuration.' He adds, 'you have only to think upon me, and I shall be there' (133). In the traditional Faustus story, Faustus chooses between rival devils on the basis of their speed at summons,[21] and here Sayers gives the motif a function in the mechanism of evil, which throughout the play is materialized by will, not words, in line with the concept of 'approbation' explored in *Mind*. Sayers wrote to a master at Eton whose sixteen-year olds had enjoyed the play: 'All the conjurations […] are quite authentic – guaranteed to produce results,'[22] a jocular remark made in the knowledge that as the play develops, one of its themes is the powerlessness of words apart from the will of the person who uses them.

Faustus paradoxically uses Mephistopheles to bring him nearer to an understanding of God's nature, a theme made explicit in the final scene where Faustus accuses Mephistopheles of being in league with God. Told by Mephistopheles in Scene I that 'Evil is one of my names,' Faustus asks 'Did God make thee? Was all the evil in the world made by God?' (131). His questions are repeated in the last scene when he finally learns the truth that Mephistopheles is the potentiality for evil inevitably

[21] Butler, *Faust*, 115.
[22] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 292.

attendant on the existence of good. In Scene 1 Mephistopheles steers Faustus into a false conclusion by a partial answer asking him to look at the world God made.

> MEPHISTOPHELES Would you not say it was the work of a mad brain, cruel and blind and stupid - this world where the thorn chokes the flower, where the fox slays the fowl and the kite the fox […] Where men, made truly enough in the image of their Maker, rend, ravish and torture one another, lay waste the earth […] War, fire, famine, pestilence – is He all-good that delights in these, or all-powerful that likes them not and endures them? Ask thyself this.
> FAUSTUS I have asked a hundred times without thy prompting (132).

In the Goethe lecture Sayers says: '[The Devil] is much better served by exploiting our virtues than by appealing to our lower passions; consequently, it is when the Devil looks most noble and reasonable that he is most dangerous.'[23] In seeking to escape human suffering Faustus will repudiate the knowledge of good and evil and thus enter the animal state, but paradoxically this description of animal behaviour alerts the audience to the self-deception of his project. The answer to Faustus's question is not, as Mephistopheles implies, that God made evil in his own image but that he created a world in which potential evil is a corollary of human freedom.

Faustus moves into blank verse with a request to drink the cup which drowns the 'devil's gift of knowledge' (135). At this stage there is no pact, and when Mephistopheles pulls Faustus out of his protective circle so that he can drink a goblet of the wine that skews judgment, Faustus is accepting only Mephistopheles's view of the world, or rather his pretended view. He has embraced 'Not-Hamlet' but has not yet activated 'Anti-Hamlet'. Faustus's words after the draught are Shakespearean pastiche, reminiscent of the words of John of Gaunt or Titania[24] when they ascribe disturbances in nature to troubles in the body politic:

> God's old realm,
> Like an estate farmed by a bankrupt, dwindles
> The sluggard way to ruin; her rank hedgerows
> Drop down their brambles over the sour ditch;
> […] and in her hungry fields
> Only the blind mole and the skipping coney
> Drive their dark tunnels 'twixt the thistle and thorn (136).

[23] Sayers, *Search and Statement*, 231.
[24] Shakespeare, *Richard II* (II.i); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (II.i).



Fig. 6. *The Devil to Pay*: Frank Napier as Mephistopheles and Harcourt Williams as Faustus, with the young Faustus and Helen in the mirror.

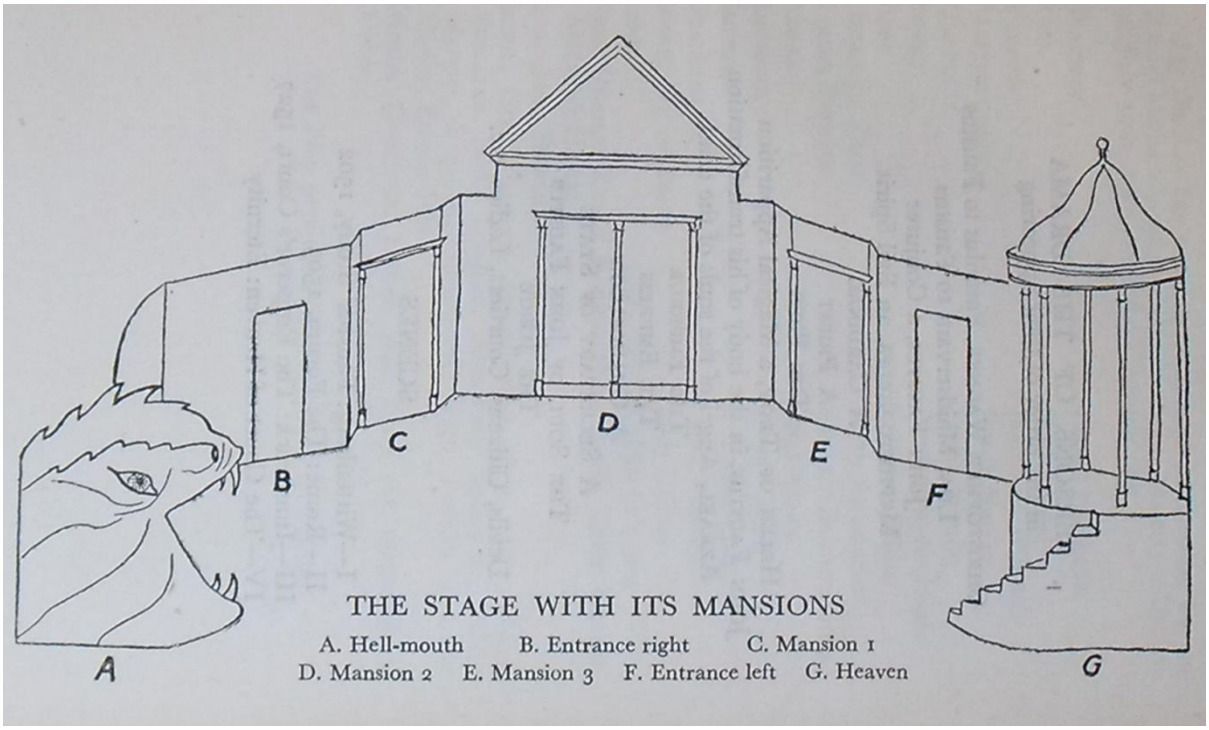


Fig. 7. Sketch of the set of *The Devil to Pay*.

These lines expressing what Faustus thinks is wrong with God's creation also represent in macrocosm the bankruptcy of Faustus's own soul, driving its way in dark tunnels choked with unproductive weeds and prefiguring the reduction of his own soul to an animal level of consciousness. To apply Downing's method of considering all writing acts as performance, Faustus is now a character in a scene of his own creating: his adoption of someone else's voice signals that the literal content of his words may be unreliable, and in a paradigm of dramatic method it also expresses something true about the speaker who has moved away from his former self. Harcourt Williams, who played the older Faustus, was noted for his delivery of Shakespearean verse and might well have given Sayers's lines an exaggerated swagger. In my view the strongly-paced pentameter sits comfortably in a sixteenth century setting. Commentators who have criticised elements of pastiche in Sayers's verse are missing the point that pastiche has a function in the drama.

The division between verse and prose in the play is not the straightforward Elizabethan one which distinguishes between social classes or comic and tragic scenes. Leaving aside the final scene in the Court of Heaven, verse is the medium of expression for Faustus's states of enchantment, its formality underlining the performative nature of his necromancy. For instance, when Faustus conjures up the battle between Pope and Emperor in Scene III all the characters, including Wagner, speak in verse during the conjuration and return to prose after Faustus's 'Is the show ended?' (188). On this basis it would be logical to argue that the verse of the final judgment scene in the Court of Heaven points to a location in Faustus's consciousness or soul. The Pope's long speech to Faustus in Scene II, also in verse, is delivered by one who by virtue of his office is 'Set on a tower above the plains of time' (155) and may again be considered to be addressed to Faustus's soul.

The falsity of Faustus's state outside the protective circle is characterised not only by his rhetoric but also by the presence of illusion from this point on, representing a potentiality for conversion to active evil. When Faustus sees Helen by his side in the mirror (Fig. 6, p. 119), Mephistopheles transforms the image of an older man into Faustus's younger self, but when he moves forward to enter the mirror-world the illusions vanish. Mephistopheles acknowledges Faustus's relative innocence at this stage by saying that Helen is a 'mirage/Thrown on the sky by a hot reality/Far below

your horizon' (138). Faustus does not yet realise that whatever happens in time can not be altered, only redeemed, and that the suffering of the world can only be answered by the Cross. The visual illusions of the mirror, as well as providing a plot motif, symbolise Faustus's mental illusion that good intentions alone can alleviate suffering: in this first scene he throws money to beggars and sees them attack each other as they scramble for coins, establishing a pattern that will be repeated. Although Faustus's compassion makes him easy bait for Mephistopheles it also enables him to hang on to the vestige of humanity which, in the next scene, keeps alive a hope that he may yet repent and decide not to sign the pact.

Scene II: Rome

The religion which Faustus regards as the source of the world's illusions has its centre in Rome, and while Faustus is preaching 'God is the enemy of us all' (153), the counterproductive ramifications of his efforts to help people signal the bankruptcy of his philosophy to the audience both within the play and outside it. When the Pope appears Faustus asks:

> I am not God,
> But can command the devil's power to serve
> Good ends. Which is the devil – God, or I? (155).

The Pope's reply to Faustus, in a speech that will be discussed below, is that so far he has 'sinned through love' (156) and can still be saved. The possibility of choosing good exerts a momentary appeal when Lisa asks Faustus to return to Wittenberg where he can resume his earlier calling and valued place in the community, to Wagner's dismay holding him in her arms and confessing her love for him. Mephistopheles, seeing 'Here's a soul drowsing into Paradise,' brings on the vision of Helen, whom Faustus has still not possessed. 'O love, hast thou forgotten?' 'Not till the seas run dry; not till the centre/Kiss the circumference, and time's iron hand/Crack the great axle of the world asunder!' (160). Following the simplicity of the scene with Lisa, these hectic rhetorical commonplaces remind us that Faustus is playing a part in a self-generated scenario of increasing aridity. Discussing "God and the Artist" in the light of Maritain's theology Rowan Williams has said, 'There is a sense that the world "gives" itself to be understood in the very moment when we realize that describing it simply in terms of how it relates to me, let alone serves my

interest, is an inadequate or actively untruthful perspective.'[25] With Lisa, Faustus is on the verge of this perception but Mephistopheles diverts his interest to Helen, the 'untruthful perspective' whose whole mode of existence is a negation.

Helen is also Lilith, the primal prelapsarian object of desire, and when she says 'None may touch my lips/While on his own hangs still the fatal taste/Of Eve's sharp apple' (162), Faustus thinks he is being shown the way to enjoy her and asks Mephistopheles the price of escaping the Fall. 'The usual price. Your soul' (163). The use of the word 'usual' playfully implies that Mephistopheles is aware of his predecessors in the evolving myth, creating a sense that Faustus's pact has significance beyond the confines of his own story. This time, knowledge is not temporarily dulled with alcohol; it will be taken away for twenty-four years as Faustus enters a prelapsarian state. Once the threshold of assent has been passed, the illusions of Helen and Rome vanish and Faustus is back in his study at Wittenberg, signing the pact with his blood. 'See how the red stream runs upon the table like letters written in fire' (165) he says, echoing Marlowe's famous line when hell yawns, 'See where Christ's blood streams in the firmament.'[26] With twenty-four years of irresponsible youth ahead of him, the Young Faustus in the mirror departs with Helen while Mephistopheles carries away his old body. Helen is a succubus for whom Faustus enters the mirror and becomes young, while his body in time ages. This double time frame is central to the choice Faustus is offered in the last scene. In choosing a prelapsarian existence he has relinquished his human soul with its potentiality not only for evil but also for good and the work of redemption. In terms of Sayers's analogy, he has brought active evil into existence by the pact with Mephistopheles because to deny the existence of evil is also to deny the existence of its corollary, good.

When Wagner and Lisa resolve to continue Faustus's work among the sick and poor the implication is that it is a different Faustus who has departed with Helen, and that his real work is continuing through those who truly love him. Lisa makes this explicit:

---

[25] Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 154.

[26] Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (the B-Text, 1616) in *The Plays* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 267.

> [...] when God sees what we are doing, He will say: That is the real Faustus; that's what he really meant to do. Faustus is still doing good by his servants' hands [...] our work will plead for our master's soul (168).

The idea that the 'real Faustus' is continuing his good work in the real world prepares the audience for Faustus's second chance in the final scene. Wagner and Lisa perform the same function as Malcolm and Macduff in *Macbeth*, asserting the possibility of basic human goodness in a world where the evil choices prompted by sorcery are getting out of hand. To end the scene, Wagner tells Mephistopheles to saddle two chimaeras 'and see that one of them is trained to carry a lady' (169). He and Lisa are immune from Mephistopheles's deceptions and are thus able to take advantage of his arts without contamination, embodying the principle expressed by Adam in *Paradise Lost*:

> Evil into the mind of God or Man
> May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave
> No spot or blame behind. (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book V, 117-9.)

This is the source of the word 'approbation', used by Sayers and Charles Williams for making sin real.

Scene III: Innsbruck

In this scene Faustus is played by a younger actor, emphasising the illusory nature of the pact and in the original production making a virtue of the fact that at fifty-nine Harcourt Williams was too old for the younger role. Twenty-four years later at the Emperor's court in Innsbruck Lisa has died after catching the plague in the course of her work with the poor, signalling the death of spiritual values in the world of temporal power-politics. When Faustus offers magical help to the Emperor in his wars against the Pope, the Emperor has misgivings and Mephistopheles diverts him with a vision of Helen, prompting Faustus to attack the Emperor in a jealous rage. Hell-mouth yawns and the crowds fall on Faustus, whose soul Mephistopheles claims as he is about to die. Faustus calls: 'Wagner! Lisa! Christ!/ Save me! Have pity!' (192). Unlike Marlowe's Faustus he has called on Christ *in articulo mortis*, a death-bed repentance, and as he dies the vision of Helen vanishes and the Angel of Death, Azrael, comes forward to collect his soul in a bag. When Mephistopheles materialises to demand Faustus's soul as his due, a black dog jumps out of the bag as Azrael says, 'It's all the soul he's got' (194). The black dog is reminiscent of Goethe's Mephistopheles who first manifests himself in the shape of a black poodle.

Its appearance on stage is undoubtedly a *coup de théâtre* but possibly also one of the reasons why this play has not had a mainstream revival.

Faustus's soul has become that of an animal, lacking knowledge of good and evil, the ability to make moral choices, directly as a result of the pact. The degeneration is not the result of his progressively more irresponsible behaviour, though that too is a consequence of the pact. Sayers said of her own play, 'Faustus bargains for animal innocence – that is his choice, and he gets it. His soul become the soul of an animal, knowing neither good nor evil, and irresponsible.'[27]

Scene IV: The Court of Heaven

The use of verse throughout the final scene suggests that it may be thought of as taking place in Faustus's conscience or soul in a showdown comparable with the ending of *Zeal* where William wrestles spiritually with the archangel Michael. The distribution of verse and prose in the play encourages such an anagogic reading, since earlier examples of verse signal that the content relates to Faustus's perception of the world. The scene is a court drama where Sayers uses the forensic writing honed in her years as a detective novelist to create a gripping climax. Mephistopheles is the plaintiff, with Azrael defending. Mephistopheles claims that he has been swindled out of Faustus's soul, and the Judge's reply is that Mephistopheles has brought it on himself:

> Stop talking, Mephistopheles.
> Give me a moment to peruse the terms.
> Why! What is this? 'Agree to take away
> The knowledge of good and evil'? Come now, my poor
> Deluded and benighted imp of darkness,
> What did you think would happen to the soul
> When you did that to it? (198).

With Mephistopheles's help Faustus has been tampering with God's created order: as with William of Sens and many of Sayers's fictional criminals, he has set destruction into motion by making himself equal to God the Creator. His calling on Christ *in articulo* is a first acknowledgment that the God of reason is also the God of love and mercy and that the Natural Theology which he distorted for his own ends in the first scene must be complemented by Grace and Revelation. The Judge says that God will

[27] Sayers, *Search and Statement*, 238.

not ‘unbind the chain of cause and consequence’ (201) and Mephistopheles, who has never been under the illusions he has induced in his pupil, confirms that to circumvent God’s order is to enter ‘the closed ring, the place/From which there is no way, no way, no way out’ (202). The repetition echoes the epigraph to the play from a sermon by John Donne: ‘[...] to be secluded eternally, eternally, eternally, from the sight of God’.[28] The real way out of suffering is to redeem rather than reverse evil ‘by thorn and cross’ (202). The fact that Faustus has been operating in a world of his own illusions opens up the possibility of giving Faustus back the knowledge of good and evil without unbinding cause and effect in God’s world, that is, to restore to him a soul capable of being damned in the world where humans take responsibility for their choices.

In an increasingly tense few pages Faustus is presented with two options. The first is to continue his prelapsarian state in Limbo: ‘[…]to live content/ Eternally, and never look on God’ (204); the second involves the restoration of the knowledge of good and evil, with the corollary of Faustus’s inevitable damnation for having called evil into existence in the shape of Mephistopheles.

> Either to lose God and not know the loss,
> Nor even to remember God exists;
> Or see the glories that I may not share,
> And in the sharp hell of a lost desire
> Burn on unquenchably (205).

Faustus finally turns to Mephistopheles to answer the question he put to him originally: ‘Who made thee?’ (206). When Mephistopheles replies ‘God, as the light makes the shadow’ Faustus initially fails to understand that the point is privation: ‘Is God, then, evil?’ Mephistopheles had duped Faustus with only half the story, but this time he gives him the whole picture:

> I am the price that all things pay for being,
> The shadow on the world, thrown by the world
> Standing in its own light, which light God is (206-7).

Mephistopheles is Not-Hamlet, the absence symbolised by shadow: it is Faustus’s conscious approbation that makes evil a reality. When Faustus calls on Jesus, Mephistopheles is scornful: ‘Thinkest thou with those/Same words wherewith thou

[28] Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays*, 116.

once did'st conjure me/To conjure justice?'(207). Faustus picks up Mephistopheles's words from Scene One and this time adds their implication for a person of faith: 'Not in the words/Is Power, but in the faith of him that speaks/And in the person of the very Christ/In whom stands all the meaning of Creation' (208). Mephistopheles knows, and Faustus comes to realise, that justice is something which happens on the different plane of the human heart, as it does in *The Merchant of Venice*, which this scene echoes. Faustus ends the speech with a moment of *anagnorisis* in which understanding and obedience are combined: 'What would God have me do?' (208). The Judge's answer is that Faustus alone must choose in the light of the knowledge of good and evil newly restored by grace. In this play, as in *Zeal*, the choice of salvation is made by the lonely individual: we shall see that when the protagonist of *The Just Vengeance* experiences a similar *anagnorisis*, the answer is found within a community of guilt and redemption.

Newly aware of Mephistopheles's insubstantiality, Faustus accepts that Christ's inclusive and redemptive suffering is indeed the only route to costly and real redemption in time:

> I will go down with Mephistopheles
> To the nethermost pit of fire unquenchable
> Where no hope is, and over the pathless gulf
> Look up to God (208).

Faustus's words echo William of Sens's hope that even from hell he may look through the flames to see the finished church (*Zeal*, 99). There is an important difference, however: William's art has an integrity that will survive him, whereas Faustus is the creator only of illusion. He has willed a 'happy ending' which is false to the Idea of the Creator, and although we have seen that Garrick's version of *Hamlet* can be interpreted in positive terms as adding to the tradition, Faustus has unequivocally called evil into being by making a choice from which in the words of Mephistopheles there is 'no way out', denying the validity and efficacy of the Cross. In allowing him to remake his original choice the Judge suggests that there is in fact a way out if Faustus rewrites his own story by taking it back into contact with the Idea at its source. Sayers thus neatly brings the theology of redemption into her treatment of the Faustus legend at the same time as exemplifying the work of the writer in line with her Trinitarian analogy in *The Mind of the Maker*.

Faustus's story is rewritten so that both the Judge and Mephistopheles get what they want: the continued possibility of claiming Faustus's soul. As we shall see in the discussion of *The Man Born to be King*, theologians from the Church Fathers onwards have been divided as to whether a soul can be saved from hell, but in Sayers's time, Hans Urs von Balthasar argued that even the furthest reaches of hell were not outside Christ's salvific scope.[29] Faustus is allowed the chance to redeem his original soul, not the morally impaired soul which he has had for the last twenty-four years, by entering Purgatory, which in the play is presided over by Mephistopheles. This solution was not open to the Protestant/atheist Marlowe, whose Faustus enters Hell irrevocably. The Judge says to Mephistopheles:

> Thou hast claimed thine own,
> It is thine. Burn it. Touch not my good grain,
> I shall require it at thy hand some day;
> And for thou knowest that thy time is short,
> Be diligent (210).

Mephistopheles here assumes a double role as the agent both of evil and its redemption, echoing the telescoping of Williams's *Seed of Adam*, where the Negress Hell assumes a redemptive role as one of Williams's figures of 'remedial providence'. Spanos has identified Mephistopheles as having something in common with the figure of the Accuser in Williams's *Judgement at Chelmsford*,[30] but as the two plays were written in the same year, the influence seems to me unlikely to be great. Sayers's debt to Williams's earlier figures of 'remedial providence', however, is undoubted. The Judge speaks familiarly to Mephistopheles, the Not-God who has been brought into being by the Judge's own existence, as if acknowledging an existential bond. That the Judge is Jesus is revealed by his reference to Judgment Day and by his words to Faustus: 'Lo! I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee/Even to the world's end' (Matthew 28.20). Redemption will happen through the materiality of the Incarnation, as Sayers insisted it must in *The Mind of the Maker*. In her Faust lecture she said: 'The sin of Adam is the occasion of the Incarnation: redeemed man is something more poignantly blessed than innocent man could ever have been.'[31] In the last few pages of the musical score by Gerald H. Knight, Azrael

---

[29] Discussed in Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 178.
[30] William V. Spanos "Charles Williams' *Judgement at Chelmsford*: A Study in the Aesthetic of Sacramental Time," *The Christian Scholar* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1962): 117.
[31] Sayers, *Search and Statement*, 235.

as Cantor receives antiphonal responses in four-part harmony alternately from the Angels and Devils of the Chorus: the final conflict for Faustus's soul takes place chorally, operating on the same principle as Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius*, which contrasts angels and devils in the treble and bass.[32] The crescendo of antiphonal liturgical singing must have enveloped the audience in the small space of the Chapter House.

Themes in *The Devil to Pay*

When Sayers sent the completed script to the Festival organiser, Margaret Babington, on 17 March 1939, she identified three speeches that could be quoted in advance publicity. 'Theologically speaking, these are the cardinal points of the play.' [33] The first is the Pope's speech in Scene III in which he responds to Faustus's wish to do good to the poor. As we have seen, the Pope extends the hope of salvation to Faustus before he has given approbation to Mephistopheles's, and Sayers uses this speech within the drama to exemplify the reality of the threshold of assent, which in the light of the literary analogy in *Mind* might be seen in terms of moving from 'Not-Hamlet' to 'Anti-Hamlet'. We have seen this process at work in the novels, and the reality of choice is here theologically focused by the Pope:

> Son, go in peace; for thou has sinned through love;
> To such sin God is merciful. Not yet
> Has thy familiar devil persuaded thee
> To that last sin against the Holy Ghost
> Which is, to call good evil, evil good.
> Only for that is no forgiveness. Not
> That God would not forgive thee all the sins there are,
> Being what He is; but that this sin destroys
> The power to feel his pardon, so that damnation
> Is consequence, not vengeance; and indeed
> So all damnation is (156).

Mephistopheles timelessly retorts: 'Did ever a man use so many words to confess his own incompetence? That fellow has no business in Peter's seat – he ought to be in parliament' (156). The Pope's last four lines are Sayers's explication of the last sentence of the Athanasian Creed, 'This is the Catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.' People are not damned by God but by their

[32] Gerald H. Knight, Incidental Vocal Music to *The Devil to Pay* (British Library Music Collections, F.1267.s.(3.), 1939).
[33] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 120.

own choices which block access to salvation. Sayers had not yet studied Dante but a few years later she found the same process in reverse in the release of souls from Purgatory in *Purgatorio* XXI, where the poet Statius explains to Dante that the soul is not released from Purgatory by divine intervention but is free at precisely the moment when sin becomes purged:

> The will itself attests its own purgation;
> Amazed, the soul that's free to change its inn
> Finds its mere will suffice for liberation.[34]

In the Introduction to this volume of her Dante translation Sayers was to write: 'Purgatory is not a system of Divine book-keeping – so many years for so much sin – but a process of spiritual improvement which is completed precisely when it is complete.' [35] Sayers goes on to say, 'The Divine acceptance of a repentance *in articulo mortis* does *not* mean that the sinner 'gets away with it' scot-free. What it does mean is that the soul is now obliged, with prolonged labour and pains, and without the assistance of the body, to accomplish in Purgatory the entire process of satisfaction and purification, the greater part of which should have been carried out on earth.' She quotes Aquinas on penalty and purgation: 'But if we speak of the removal of sin as to the stain, it is evident that the stain of sin cannot be removed from the soul without the soul being united to God, since it was through being separated from Him that it suffered the loss of its splendour, in which the stain consists […] Now man is united to God by his will. Therefore the stain of sin cannot be removed from man unless his will accepts the order of divine justice.'[36] Faustus will undergo the purgation which the God-given nature of things decrees will result in automatic release when the process is complete. The concept of self-release from Purgatory reinforces the Pope's statement that there are no sins God will not forgive, something we shall see again with a different outcome when Sayers comes to portray Judas.

The other two speeches Sayers identifies as central are from the final scene in the Court of Heaven. Faustus bitterly complains that he did not know what he was letting himself in for when he bargained to return to primal innocence: 'They have taken

---

[34] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), 236.
[35] Sayers, *Purgatory*, 59-60.
[36] Sayers, *Purgatory*, 59.

away my Lord these many years […] I did not bargain for a soul like this […] Is it sin to cancel out a sin?' (200). The Judge replies:

> All things God can do, but this thing He will not:
> Unbind the chain of cause and consequence,
> Or speed time's arrow[37] backward [...]
> There is no waste with God; He cancels nothing
> But redeems all (201).

God will not undo, only redeem, and Faustus's choice of returning to the pre-pact knowledge of good and evil does not contradict this because in dramatic terms we have seen the operation of a double time-scale, with Faustus experiencing the illusion of twenty-four years of eternal youth while Lisa and Wagner have continued his work, ageing and dying in a temporal and material world. The decision to return to his full humanity is a decision to rewrite the story from the point where Faustus left the real world for the shadow-life offered by Mephistopheles. The final speech on which Sayers placed special emphasis is Mephistopheles's explanation of who he is: 'The shadow on the world, thrown by the world/Standing in its own light, which light God is' (206-7). Mephistopheles is the potentiality which exists simply because God creates, and when Faustus unites his will with his, as Sayers posits in Chapter VII of *Mind*, he enacts an embodiment of the theory of evil as privation. This was a challenging philosophy to propound a few weeks before the beginning of World War II.

Evil as privation is a significant theme in Thomas Mann's monumental novel *Doctor Faustus*, written during the Nazi years and published in 1947. Adrian Leverkühn, the protagonist, is a composer who deliberately contracts syphilis in order to increase the intensity of his creative inspiration and whose final work before his descent into permanent madness is entitled *The Lamentation of Doctor Faustus*. The narrator, Leverkühn's friend Zeitblom, notes: 'I only say to myself that wherever theology is [...] there too the devil belongs to the picture and asserts his complementary reality to that of God.'[38] This complementarity is in the tradition of Goethe where God and Mephistopheles agree to test Faustus's faithfulness, but Leverkühn does not escape personal damnation. His music, however, is that of a genius, and in this respect he is

---

[37] The term the 'arrow of time' was popularised by Arthur Eddington's 1928 book *The Nature of the Physical World*, from which Sayers quotes in her epigraph to Chapter II of *The Mind of the Maker*, 15.
[38] Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (London: Secker & Warburg, 1959 (1949)), 96.

'damned for the sake of the work', to use the words given to William of Sens (*Zeal*, 34). As students Leverkühn and Zeitblom attend theology lectures by Eberhard Schleppfuss whose theory is that:

> God's logical dilemma had consisted in this: that He had been incapable of giving the creature […] both independent choice, in other words free will, and at the same time the gift of not being able to sin. Piety and virtue, then, consisted in making a good use, that is to say no use at all, of the freedom which God had to grant the creature as such – and that, indeed, if you listened to Schleppfuss, was a little as though this non-use of freedom meant a certain existential weakening, a diminution of the intensity of being, in the creature outside of God.[39]

Mann's Leverkühn, Sayers's Faustus and perhaps her William of Sens feel a sense of 'existential weakening' in not making use of the freedom to sin, and the Mephistopheles-figures in both works exploit the vulnerability of God in this respect. The appeal of the Faustus theme lies in the glamour of the existential hero whose transgression of God's law is associated with the power to create an alternative world, at least for a time. Sayers taps into this with William of Sens but her Faustus, like her Judas, is not a creator: everything he attempts turns to destruction. This perhaps makes him ultimately a less interesting character than William and than other Faustus-figures such as Leverkühn. The explanation for Sayers's emphasis may lie in the play's political context: Sayers is warning against those who make themselves equal to God on the world stage. Mann's narrator Zeitblom makes an explicit link with his own times in the paragraph following the quotation above, saying with controlled understatement that 'a notion of the importance of freedom'[40] was dawning on the German people for the first time. Sayers's choice of subject in 1939 was undoubtedly also influenced by world events.

Critiques of *The Devil to Pay* and its Theology

The reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* focused on Faustus as a failed social reformer, praising Sayers's courage in reinterpreting the Faust legend 'in terms which this generation may appreciate' and placing the 'cheat-the-devil' theme in the context of other literary works, for instance *The Merchant of Venice*.[41] The *Church Times* reviewer was impressed by the speech in which Mephistopheles describes

[39] Mann, *Faustus*, 101.
[40] Mann, *Faustus*, 101.
[41] "Miss Sayers' Modern Faustus," *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 17, 1939, 353.

God's world as a place where 'the cat torments the mouse for pastime before she eats it for sport […] where men, made truly enough in the image of their Maker, rend, ravish and torture one another' (132), and commented that 'neither the subsequent rebuke of the Pope, nor the speech of the celestial judge, seemed to me to answer it on its own plane. One left the theatre with the uncomfortable feeling that the devil had the best of the argument.'[42]

I do not agree that the words of the Judge fail to answer Mephistopheles's challenge, but apart from that I suggest that the reviewer has fallen into the trap of assuming that the theology is conveyed only by the play's words. Essentially in this play Mephistopheles's arguments are answered by what happens, not by what is said, and I have shown that Mephistopheles is not only aware of the inadequacy of his own arguments, but finally colludes with God in the process of redemption. Faustus asks: 'Are you two allies, then,/Playing into each other's hands, and grinning/Friendship across my frontiers?' (206). There is no need for the Pope or the Judge to answer Mephistopheles because he himself not only admits the duplicity of all his words and actions, but even becomes a figure of 'remedial providence'.

John Thurmer has challenged the play's credentials as an embodiment of theology, arguing that the question of the origin of evil is not integral to the play on the grounds that Faustus is not himself consciously aware of it:

> We are on the brink of the question of the origin of evil early in the play, but Mephistopheles diverts the conversation, so it is not fully taken up until the judgment scene […] If Mephistopheles had explained that he, the devil, was a mere abstraction and potentiality until Faustus summoned him to active evil, then perhaps the philosophical question would be directly linked to Faustus' repentance […] Mephistopheles has not exactly become the hero of this play, but he has made the doctrine of the origin of evil an insertion into it, rather than something which arises out of it.[43]

I have two points to make here. The important thing for the coherence of the play as the embodiment of theology is that the audience should perceive what Mephistopheles is, regardless of what Faustus thinks as a character within the drama, and I have shown that there are many pointers. But secondly, as Thurmer says, it

---

[42] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 132 (note).

[43] John Thurmer, *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996), 67.

would certainly add to the satisfaction of the final scene if Faustus does achieve that realisation and I think he does. Mephistopheles's answer to Faustus's question 'What art thou, Mephistopheles?' is unequivocal, and Faustus shows he fully understands the metaphor of 'the shadow on the world' when he replies that he was 'blind to my own parable' (207) when he taught Wagner the origins of an eclipse. His retort to Mephistopheles, 'Mock me not, nothingness' (209), is one of many small indications that he consciously grasps the theology. The theme of evil as privation is not just an insertion: Sayers embodies the idea in action by making Mephistopheles Not-God with the potentiality to be Anti-God, and she uses those traditional elements of the Faust-story that can be adapted to illustrate Faustus's choice to will evil into existence.

The Devil to Pay is not in the same category as the fiction mentioned above which offers readers alternative endings. As we have seen, Faustus as an artist betrays his own creativity by bringing into being a world which is false to its own Idea. He does not pursue the good of his own work, but manipulates others for the purpose of ending suffering quickly, with counterproductive results. Over and above the failed integrity of Faustus's world is Maritain's question, to quote Rowan Williams, of 'whether a world laid before us by an artist is desirable for the kind of creatures we know ourselves to be […] If we have no conception of what kind of creatures we are, then we shall have little or nothing to help us with that judgment, and art becomes a carnival of the uneducated passions.'[44] The world on the other side of the mirror in which Faustus's illusions are realised is precisely an illustration of such a carnival. In the final scene, by contrast, Faustus chooses the drama of salvation rather than the insensibility of Limbo, embarking upon the education of the passions offered by the imitation of Christ and acknowledging the emptiness of the world of the Mephistophelean pact. Faustus believes for a time that his world has parity with God's creation, allowing Mephistopheles to write his script, but the audience is not invited to appropriate it. In *The Devil to Pay* Sayers is dramatising the failure of an alternative outcome, and in this respect the Anti-Hamlet theory of *Mind*, although in some respects open to challenge, is a continuation of the thinking behind *The Devil to Pay*. Her next project, *The Man Born to be King*, will be structured round a multiplicity of outcomes extending beyond the play's performance.

[44] Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, 40.

Conclusion

In this discussion of the play I have sought to show that Sayers embodied theology in action by giving dramatic form to the theories about the origin of evil put forward in *The Mind of the Maker*. The relevance of the origin of evil to her whole argument in *Mind* is apparent at the opening of the next chapter: 'When the writer's Idea is revealed or incarnate by his Energy, then, and only then, can his Power work on the world' (88). The diversion of the Energy into Anti-Hamlet would mean that Hamlet will not be there for the world, just as Christian salvation will not ultimately be available for the person who irreversibly chooses Christ's shadow, Mephistopheles, Not-God.

During the writing of the play Sayers was in close contact with Harcourt Williams and Frank Napier, who were on tour with *Zeal* and made comments on the developing script of the new play, in which they would play Faustus and Mephistopheles respectively.[45] Napier encouraged Sayers to follow her artistic instincts and not anticipate critical opinion, and in fact the play received a cautious critical welcome: the TLS reviewer saw Faustus's disillusioned idealism as having contemporary relevance, and we can infer that T.S. Eliot thought well of the play from Sayers's reply to a letter of his.[46] The transfer of *The Devil to Pay* to the West End was terminated by the outbreak of war but a proscenium-arch theatre could not have replicated the closeness to the action experienced in the Canterbury Chapter House, where many entrances and exits were made through the audience. Photographs of the production show that the expansive acting style of Napier and Williams was well adapted to include the audience in the circle of their character projection (Fig. 6), mediating a participative engagement in the intimate atmosphere of the Canterbury Chapter House. The colourful set with its hell-mouth, the striking costumes and the chorus of singing devils and angels combined to support Sayers's conception of the play as making the same sensory impact as medieval and early modern drama. The final few pages, like *Zeal*, have a liturgical level of singing and hieratic movement.

I have suggested that the success of *Zeal* was partly dependent on the appeal of its love story and also on the element of detective work required of the audience in

[45] *The Devil to Pay* files 1-4 and 1-5. Sayers archive, The Marion E. Wade Center.
[46] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 134.

working out which of William's sins was the mortal one. *The Devil to Pay* lacks a comparable encouragement for the audience to appropriate the narrative, although the question of Mephistopheles's real identity is an ever-present puzzle. Like William, Faustus experiences an *anagnorisis* followed by repentance, and in both cases the protagonist's questions are resolved in a scene that has visionary elements, but in Faustus's case, unlike Sayers's other three festival plays, the *anagnorisis* is not apparently associated with the celebration of a sacramental event within the play. Working from Sayers's discussion in the Introduction, however, I suggest that Faustus's conjuration of Mephistopheles should be seen as an anti-sacrament, a travesty brought into potential existence by the real sacraments of the Church and actualised by Faustus's approbation. In the Introduction Sayers says that the medieval magician called up spirits in the name of the Trinity, as Faustus does here: 'In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti' (128).

> In the very act of denying and defying God, he surrounded himself with every protection that the name of God could afford against the consequences of the act. […] It is this curious dissociation of power from the source of power that characterises magic as opposed to sacrament. The magical power is, in fact, considered to inhere in the divine name itself, and to operate automatically and independently of the divine authority (110-11).

If *The Devil to Pay* lacks a sacramental event in which the audience is a transforming and transformed presence, it offers instead something they may recognise as an enactment of an anti-sacrament, applying Sayers's ideas about privation theory to the religious rites which are the meeting place of the human and divine. Unlike the Church's sacraments, the anti-sacrament is not a transformative two-way encounter but ends in a circle of negation.[47]

As we have seen, Sayers laid emphasis on the fact that the writer is his or her own reader in a dynamic whereby the Power returns the Idea to its source, something that can happen continuously during the writing process. In *The Devil to Pay*, once he has realised the worthlessness of the scenario he has generated, Faustus is able through God's grace to rewrite his pact with Mephistopheles by returning the Idea to its source with the prospect of ultimate redemption. His *anagnorisis* thus initiates a

[47] John Parker has argued that all Marlowe's Antichrist figures, including Faustus, point to a God who is absent because he is both indescribable and banned from being represented on stage. Parker, *Aesthetics of Antichrist*, 183-245.

process of salvation not only in theological terms but also of Faustus considered as a creative artist. The play dramatises the privation theory of evil by showing Faustus giving approbation to a pact whose mode is illusion and whose outcomes are destructive, and at the same time it illustrates a negative outcome of the Trinitarian analogy of creativity when the mirror-world of Faustus's illusion cuts him off from the possibility of referring ideas back to their source. He has tried to will an outcome, the end of suffering, that is contrary to the nature of the original idea. Sayers's Trinitarian analogy springs from her belief in the sacramentality of all work, particularly creative work, and to the extent that *The Devil to Pay* embodies a demonstration of the way creativity operates, it has a sacramental dimension while also sharing in what was believed by the Canterbury playwrights to be the wider sacramentality of all dramatic performances. The protagonist of Sayers's next festival play, *The Just Vengeance*, also seeks to understand the place of evil in creation, but six years of war make the Lichfield play a very different experience.



Fig. 8. Lichfield Festival poster designed by John Piper.

Chapter Five
Partners in Rescue: *The Just Vengeance*

The Idea

The Just Vengeance was written for the 750th anniversary of Lichfield Cathedral and performed there in 1946, a year after the anniversary. It was a large-scale community production attended by Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, and was both a celebration of victory in war and an acknowledgment of the fallen human nature which makes war inevitable. The composer Antony Hopkins in his autobiography quotes the Queen Mother saying to him thirty years later: 'I've seen so many things in my life but that Lichfield occasion stands out quite clearly in my mind.'[1] According to her friend Barbara Reynolds, Sayers herself thought it was 'the best thing I've done'.[2]

In her introduction Sayers describes it as 'a miracle-play of man's insufficiency and God's redemptive act, set against the background of contemporary crisis'. She goes on to say 'this play is founded upon two passages, one from *The Divine Comedy* and the other from (I think) St. Theresa of Jesus, although I have unhappily mislaid the reference. [An *errata* slip reassigns the quotation to St Thomas a Kempis.] [3] They are complementary, and together form an almost complete statement of Atonement theology, and of the coinherence of Christ in His mystical body, the Church.' Sayers quotes Beatrice's words in the seventh canto of *Paradiso*:

> 'My infallible intuition tells me that you are wondering how the just vengeance justly was avenged ... Because he would not endure, for his own good, the rein set upon his will, [...] [Adam], in condemning himself, condemned all his offspring; wherefore the human race lay sick for many an age in great error, until it pleased the Word of God to descend to earth, where, by the sole act of His eternal love, He took that nature which had gone astray from its Maker, and joined it to Himself in His own person [...]
>
> 'As for the penalty, then, inflicted by the Cross, if it be measured by the nature thus put on, never did any bite so justly; and in like manner, never was

[1] Antony Hopkins, *Beating Time* (London: Futura Publications, 1983 (1982)), 125.
[2] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Letters Volume Three: 1944 -1950*: *A Noble Daring*, ed. Barbara Reynolds (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998), 187.
[3] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 279. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.

> any so monstrously unjust if we look to the Person who suffered it, by whom that nature was assumed.' (Para. VII. 19. 899) (279).

She adds: 'This, with its affirmation of the true God-Manhood, presents the act of Atonement from God's side. The second, affirming the coinherence, presents the response from Man's side: "Whoso will carry the Cross, the Cross shall carry him," and should be taken in conjunction with Rom. vii. 22, "the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together," and Col. i. 24: "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you and fill up that which remaineth of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the church"'(279).

The play will demonstrate in action the paradoxes of Atonement theology, where the penalty paid by Christ to redeem sin is just insofar as he is human and unjust insofar as he is God. Barbara Reynolds sums up the theme of the play as 'divine justice and the suffering of the innocent'.[4] The suffering of the innocent, on the face of it unjust, is seen in the context of the fraternity of guilt in which the innocent have the capacity for sin instantiated by the Fall. Fraternity is simultaneously both the origin of guilt and the key to its redemption, as each individual within the fraternity is invited to share the burdens of others. Christ's redeeming action happened in historical time but has its place in the eternal web of creation and salvation, and to enter into the eternity of salvation humans must make a conscious choice at a moment in historical time. The participatory role of humanity within the salvation offered by the Atonement is central to *The Just Vengeance*: a play within the play dramatises human responses to Christ, and the audience members in the nave are invited to identify themselves with the actors onstage who are spectator-participants in the story of redemption.

In *The Just Vengeance* Sayers shifts the dramatic focus from the struggle within an individual conscience, as we saw in *Zeal* and *The Devil to Pay*, to the playing out of the claims of conscience within the context of community. The protagonists of the earlier plays entered into salvation by an act of repentance and faith against the background of a sacramental universe: in *The Just Vengeance* salvation involves sharing in Christ's suffering, bringing the play closer to the enactment of a sacramental event. Whereas the dominant genre of the Canterbury plays was chronological narrative, in *The Just Vengeance* it is the mystery, understood as a community life of Jesus in which the response of the audience is central to the

[4] Barbara Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989), 88.

drama. In *The Just Vengeance* a human individual is brought to realise that, through the Incarnation, God in Christ experiences human suffering, and that if he himself chooses to bear the burdens of others he becomes Christlike and opens the way for Christ reciprocally to bear and redeem his own burdens. This exchange is what Sayers means by 'co-inherence', borrowing the term from Charles Williams, and it is central to the process of Atonement dramatised in the play. The possibility of exchange is inherent in the Incarnation, but to take advantage of it humans have to bring two things: not only the active assent of the will, but also the acknowledgment of community in both guilt and redemption.

Sayers made symbolic use of the location of the play in the city of Lichfield. An Airman at the moment of death returns to his native Lichfield, the real place where the audience is seated at the moment of performance, but Sayers's concept of the City is also an eternal symbol derived not only from Augustine but also more immediately from the writings of Charles Williams. For Williams the City represented brotherhood and a willingness to make sacrifices for others, and this makes it an appropriate symbolic location for Sayers's exploration of Atonement theology. It also gives a logical quality to the Airman's return to his home town: he has learnt in war to make the ultimate sacrifice for his community, which now receives him in its symbolic nature as well as its historical. An exchange has taken place in which the Airman has sacrificed his life for the freedom of his compatriots. Williams identified free exchange as the key characteristic of the redeemed community,[5] while co-inherence, the bearing of another's burdens, is the cornerstone of Williams's theology in *The Descent of the Dove* (1939) and also in the novels, notably *Descent into Hell* (1937)[6] where one of the characters is literally able to take another person's suffering upon herself. Sayers conceived the reciprocal exchange initiated by the Chorus's carrying of Christ's cross as the turning point of the play: 'I do want [...] to make it quite clear that the play is not a play at all without the Carrying of the Cross [...] Up to that crucial moment, the play affirms the Incarnation of God; after that moment it affirms the in-Godding of Man.'[7]

[5] Charles Williams, "The Redeemed City" (1941) in *Images*, 102-10.
[6] Charles Williams, *The Descent of the Dove* (London: Longmans, Green, 1939); *Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1966 (1937).
[7] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 192.

In the person of the Airman, Sayers introduces a character whose puzzlement at the contradictions in his world of killing and being killed would have been very immediate to those gathered in Lichfield Cathedral after the war. He is on the threshold of eternity, and in the first section a pageant of historical and contemporary characters shares in the questions he has about the meaning of his life and death. The central section answers those questions as the pageant characters enact a mystery play showing the history of salvation from the Garden of Eden to the Cross. The third section of the play moves into a formal, liturgical mode as the Airman is ready to make the confession and commitment which will allow him to be redeemed and enter heaven, together with the pageant characters who assume their earlier roles as crowd members drawn from all historical periods. This is a Last Judgment and the characters from the Passion who have condemned Jesus and have not repented are led away, while the other pageant characters, joined by the Airman, offer to share Christ's burdens as Jesus processes round the church carrying the cross. It is the Airman who carries the Cross up to the place of Crucifixion and then, standing by the Cross, applies Jesus's last words to his own search for salvation and joins him in finally surrendering his spirit to God. The last four pages of the play are a paean of praise, most of it set to music, as the saved enter Heaven. The form of the play reflects both the architecture of salvation and the individual's journey to the point of assent. It invites the audience to identify themselves with the Airman's quest and be open to sharing in his commitment at the end of the play, a commitment which takes place in a quasi-liturgical context and with a physical continuity between the nave and the acting area, encouraging the audience to become a congregation. The movement of the actors through the audience, particularly the Airman at the beginning and Jesus followed by the Chorus on the *Via Crucis*, locates the action among the audience as citizens of Lichfield; many of them were in fact local residents. The individual journey is located within the community.

The set of the play was built against the west end of the cathedral and the congregational seating in the nave was turned round each night to accommodate the audience; thus the whole dramatic experience encompassing both actors and audience took place in the nave, the people's area of the church, near the west door (Fig. 9, p. 142). Broadly speaking the action of the play is on three levels: the ground level at which the acting area is continuous with the seating area, and the Upper and Lower Stages which are raised up on platforms and rostra. Both stages incorporate



Fig. 9. A performance of *The Just Vengeance*: the saved enter Heaven.

stairs which effectively create five or six extra levels (Fig. 11, p. 156). The Lower Stage is where the pageant and crowd scenes take place. The Upper Stage is framed with an arch and curtains in blue with gold signs of the zodiac round the arch, and this provides the location for the enactment of the mystery play. At the back of the Upper Stage is a fretwork double gate through which light can shine and which opens to reveal Heaven. The action therefore demonstrates a gradual upward movement, and scenes at the lower levels take place against a background of curtains and gates which conceal Heaven. Although the published play has relatively few stage directions, and the designer's stage plans and the director's model set have not survived, a lecture to the Sayers Society given by the play's designer, Norah Lambourne, makes it possible to work out in more detail where the action took place. According to the composer Antony Hopkins, who conducted a ninety-two-strong choir, string quartet and organ, 'The work was performed against the great west door with a stage that had been erected temporarily, and in the corner there were seats set up on scaffolding and this choir of ninety people was sitting there.'[8] Photographs of the production suggest that the choir was largely invisible behind the pillars of the aisle.

In terms of form *The Just Vengeance* is characterised by fluidity: the play moves smoothly between the traditional dramatic genres of mystery play, pageant and liturgy. In the absence of a plot whose development hinges on choices made by the protagonists, as in *Zeal* and *The Devil to Pay*, changes of mood and mode in *The Just Vengeance* are often initiated by word-association. Time is telescoped as historical figures and fictional characters from the contemporary world meet, and typology is reinforced as biblical characters are identified with each other, for instance when the murdered Abel is raised from the dead by the New Testament Jesus. Theologically the most significant of these conflations is the identification of God and Jesus as the Persona Dei (person or character of God), reinforcing the indivisibility of the Trinity and also providing a solution to a problem of practical drama: in 1946 the presentation of Christ was illegal on the commercial stage, although churches were considered exempt from this censorship if the performance was free and could be regarded as belonging to the category of worship.

[8] Antony Hopkins, "*The Just Vengeance*: Writing the Music," in *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 49.

The Just Vengeance and Censorship

As Reynolds makes clear, the principle of an actor's playing Jesus was unanimously accepted by the Dean and Chapter from the outset, probably influenced by the success of *The Man Born*.[9] Olga Horner has suggested, however, that legally the power to make this decision did not rest with the ecclesiastical authorities, and she has discussed the application of the censorship laws to performances of religious plays in two articles, the first of which deals with Martin Browne's Festival of Britain production of the York Mysteries in 1951, and the second of which discusses the precedent created by *The Just Vengeance* five years earlier.[10]

Following the Theatres Act of 1843 it was illegal for an actor to represent the persons of the Trinity in commercial performances of plays written after 1843. Pre-1843 plays such as the medieval mysteries were exempt as long as no additional material was introduced, and 'additional material' included the updating of language and changes to the sequence of scenes. Performances in church for which no fee was charged were widely considered non-commercial and therefore exempt, but as Horner shows, a clause enabling the Lord Chamberlain to intervene in any case where the peace was likely to be breached prompted some religious drama practitioners to adopt a cautious approach.

Martin Browne's 1951 Festival of Britain production of the York Mysteries in the ruins of St Mary's Abbey, York, in which God and Jesus were represented by actors, was the subject of considerable uncertainty at the time. Browne was concerned that the sale of tickets for entrance meant that the production might be considered a commercial one and thus open to a charge of blasphemy.[11] In addition, modifications to the original text made by Canon J.S. Purvis brought the script technically into the category of post-1843 plays needing a licence.[12] Over and above these considerations, any activity by protesters during a performance might be considered a breach of the peace and lead to action by the Lord Chamberlain. Browne was advised by the Festival Director Keith Thomson, however, that the Archbishops'

---

[9] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 83.

[10] Olga Horner, "The Law That Never Was: A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain," *Medieval English Theatre* 23 (2001): 34-96; and "The Law That Never Was – A Codicil: The Case of *The Just Vengeance*," *METh* 24 (2002): 104-15.

[11] See Fig. 15, p. 209, for a protest against Sayers's *The Man Born to be King* in 1941.

[12] J.S. Purvis, ed., *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Shorter Version of the Ancient Cycle* (London: SPCK, 1951).

approval together with the support of Arts Council funding would make a blasphemy charge highly unlikely.

Norah Lambourne, the designer for both the York Mysteries and *The Just Vengeance*, told Horner that Browne's anxiety at York in 1951 had been to some extent allayed by the fact that no licence had been sought for the 1946 production in Lichfield Cathedral of Sayers's *The Just Vengeance*, a new play performed by a partly professional cast for which an entry fee was charged. It should legally have fallen into the category of post-1843 plays requiring a licence. In addition, the blasphemy laws were potentially contravened by the fact that the Persona Dei was a major speaking role, played by the professional actor Raf de la Torre. Horner discusses the case of *The Just Vengeance* under two legal heads: the requirement that the Deity should not be represented in a commercial performance, and the fact that a licence was not sought for a post-1843 play. In spite of the fact that these were separate legal issues, Horner concludes that the most likely explanation for the Lord Chamberlain's lack of intervention on both counts was that 'the approval of the established Church of England protected performances of religious drama, pre-empting any public accusations of blasphemy, and even superseding the Lord Chamberlain's censorship powers.'[13] I would further suggest that in the case of *The Just Vengeance*, the use of the title "Persona Dei" to denote the conflation of God and Jesus might have been thought to make the character of the Deity less immediate. As we have seen, Masefield used an "Anima Christi" in *The Coming of Christ* in 1928. Kenneth Pickering has argued that a style of performance in which the actors are seen to be assuming their roles using onstage properties or costumes, as happens in *The Just Vengeance*, was a distancing factor that contributed to the gradual acceptance of actors in the roles of God and Jesus, leading to a relaxation of the rules in 1966 and full abolition of the censorship in 1968.[14]

There was no application for a play licence in the case either of *The Just Vengeance* or Purvis's *York Cycle*, and nothing occurred to breach the peace. In practice, however, as we shall see, where *The Just Vengeance* was concerned the presentation of Christ was not entirely uncontroversial.

[13] Horner, "A Codicil", 109.
[14] Pickering, *Drama*, 38-9.

The Just Vengeance

The Just Vengeance is the journey of a soul in the moment of death. As in *The Devil to Pay,* the choice *in articulo mortis* is a defining choice, and in both plays the audience sees the context of that choice. Faustus's life has been lived in an awareness of the framework of salvation and he has wilfully chosen not to understand it. The Airman is a modern man with no residual belief to fall back on but his dying impulse to return to his home in Lichfield marks an instinctive acceptance of the City as a redemptive community which is the beginning of his salvation. As we saw above, there is an inevitability about his return to the city of his birth following the sacrifice he has made for that community, and his puzzlement at the contradictions in his world of killing and being killed would provide the audience with a bridge into the action and theology. The theological function of the pageant that constitutes the first part of *The Just Vengeance* is to bring the Airman to an awareness of his need for salvation; the function of the mystery play in the second part is to persuade him to participate in his own 'rescue', or redemption, together with his fellow-citizens. Throughout the play the figures from Lichfield's history form a Chorus whose collective response to events, conveyed in choral speech, is limited by time and place in a way comparable with Eliot's Women of Canterbury in *Murder in the Cathedral*. The Choir, by contrast, comments on the action from an eternal perspective in words set to music. Defining and distributing the historical Chorus was a challenge for the director Frank Napier: he colour-coded them and disposed them at different levels on the front stage: 'the idea is to use the chorus as our paint-box' as he wrote to Lambourne.[15] Reynolds emphasises that 'This play, dramatic and visual, was not for reading but for hearing and *seeing*,'[16] and contemporary reviewers agreed.

Sayers was writing the play at the same time as she was translating Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and like Dante's narrative persona the Airman is both an observer of and a potential participant in salvation. The mystery play-within-a-play which is put on for his benefit makes him a paradigmatic participant in the sacramental drama that is the play as a whole. In the years since the Canterbury plays Sayers had written *The Man Born to be King*, where, as we shall see in Chapter Seven, the listeners are encouraged to identify themselves with Jesus's disciples in a hermeneutical process directed towards the gospels. In *The Just Vengeance* the Airman, like the disciples,

[15] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 93.
[16] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 95.

formulates questions on behalf both of the characters in the drama and of the audience. Narrative elements are provided by the Recorder, the Angel of the City who directs the action, addressing both the audience and the characters within the play. The Recorder is neither inside nor outside history: closely associated with the City as a locus of redemption, he is a guide who explains and questions, and his comments, though wise, do not proceed from the special insight of an eternal dimension:

> The City never speaks truth
> So surely as when it does not know what it's saying (337).

In these respects he has more in common with Dante's Virgil, or Cato in *Purgatorio*, than with Charles Williams's figures of 'remedial providence' who themselves make things happen. The neutrality of the Recording Angel links him with the Archangels in *Zeal* who are also the morally neutral agents of Providence.

The Just Vengeance opens with a musical flourish and the Recorder appears on the Upper Stage welcoming the audience in rhyming couplets and reminding the hearers of the metaphorical nature of the action they are about to witness:

> We, who are actors, bid you not forget
> That all these images on which you look
> Are but as pictures painted in a book -
> No more like that they bid you think upon
> Than this small yellow disc is like the sun (281).

This short elucidation of the nature of figurative language, which can hardly have been necessary for the middle-class audience, is a signpost for the metaphorical way the theology will be embodied. As we have seen, at this stage in its history the pageant genre is expected to bear the weight of serious content, and the audience is invited to interpret the images in a way comparable with the opening of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, where the Chorus invites the audience to 'Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.'[17] Jeffrey Knapp has argued that in *Henry V* the Chorus's invitation to the audience to use their imaginations initiates a participative sacramentality:

[17] Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Prologue to Act I.

> [...] the Chorus to *Henry V* insists that Shakespeare's players could not so much as represent clergy and king without the imaginative participation of the audience. Framing his histories as far less homiletic than sacramental experiences, Shakespeare suggests to his audience that the process of spiritual edification must necessarily be communal [...]; while by locating the real sacramental action of the theatre less on the stage than in the mind, he also encourages his auditors to take responsibility for their own spiritual welfare.[18]

In *The Just Vengeance* Sayers provides opportunities for hermeneutical engagement, in Knapp's terms locating the sacramental action in the mind, so that the events of the play, particularly the crucifixion, become paradigmatic of the participative way both the sacraments of the Church and the sacrament of the play itself are to be received.[19] The Recorder is waiting for 'one newly dead' who will return to his native city and see its history passing before his eyes. We do not know the Airman's personal history, and this enables him to be Everyman, mediating the action for the audience. As the Recorder speaks, the Chorus members enter on the lower stage.

The Pageant

The pageant section of the play begins when George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, enters from the back of the church and moves through the audience calling 'Woe to the bloody city of Lichfield!' (282), a reference to the legend that a thousand Christians were martyred there in the Emperor Diocletian's time. Fox's words are repeated over an organ accompaniment and the Choir picks up Fox's words in a whisper 'Lichfield! Lichfield!/Whisper the name of the city through the oblivion;/Let the name stir like the scurry of mice in the wainscot.' The sung words provide a dense layering of significant concepts as a counterpoint to Fox's cries, getting louder and louder: 'The sorrow with the kindred, the guilt with the derivation,/The flesh and the blood, the bread and the wine of the city' (282). The effect in the echoing cathedral space must have been thrilling as these last words introduce blood as the medium both of the violence of the Crucifixion and of the Eucharistic exchange through which its atoning effects are experienced. The 'mice in the wainscot', momentarily reminiscent of Eliot, symbolise the uncomfortable edge-of-vision particularity of the everyday where the sacrament is located, but Sayers's

---

[18] Jeffrey Knapp, "Preachers and Players in Shakespeare's England," *Representations*, no. 44 (1993): 29-59.

[19] John Parker has drawn attention to an explicit invitation to continuing engagement with the text in the late medieval Digby play of Saul's conversion, inviting 'the correccyon of them that letteryd be'. Parker, *Aesthetics of Antichrist*, 218.

own poetic voice comes through when the sound of the running feet of the Airman are heard:

> The feet of the future hurrying home to the past
> In the sudden cessation of time, the eternity of the city (283).

The 'cessation of time' signals the telescoping of historical and biblical events, a conflation comparable with Williams's techniques, but here it also has a specific dogmatic function: theologically the whole play enacts the short space for choice at the Airman's death. As he stumbles up the aisle to the front of the stage, emerging from the body of the church as a member of the community, the music stops. According to Lambourne, when the Airman's footsteps are heard 'Fox sees him [...] and goes halfway down to meet him and he falls into Fox's arms. And Fox helps him back to the steps and helps him to take off his [parachute] harness.'[20] Fox welcomes him: 'Pray compose thyself:/Thou art within the city.' 'In Lichfield?' 'Ay,/For thee it is Lichfield' (283), implying that for others it would be a different city and confirming that the Airman is Everyman.

Fox, although a pacifist, is not a benevolent figure and takes satisfaction in the fact that a man who struck him died later 'In poverty, of an ugly disease. Vengeance/ Belongs to the Lord; my hands were guiltless towards him' (287). But were they? Through an association of ideas typical of this play, the audience is drawn into the exploration of a moral and theological problem: the nature of guilt and responsibility, particularly in wartime. Just as mass murder involves the deaths of individuals, a community of guilt may be built up from individual choices. The Chorus whispers: 'Guilty, guilty, whisper the guilt of the city' (287) and the Airman assumes the role of spokesman for humanity in one of the play's most memorable speeches, delivered at floor level between the stage and the audience:

> Perhaps he thought he was doing the Lord's work too.
> The thing's a muddle; that's what you righteous people
> Never seem able to see. We try to do right
> And someone is hurt – very likely the wrong person;
> And if we do wrong, or even if we do nothing,
> It comes to the same in the end. We drop a bomb
> And condemn a thousand people to sudden death,

[20] Norah Lambourne, "*The Just Vengeance*: dressing and staging," in *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988), 41.

> The guiltless along with the guilty. Or we refuse
> To drop a bomb, and condemn a thousand people
> To a lingering death in a concentration camp
> As surely as if we had set our hands to the warrant.
> Should we have waited for the judgment? We did wait,
> And innocent people died. We *are* the judgment.
> We have no choice between killing and not killing;
> We can only choose which set of people to kill –
> And even at that, the choice is made for us;
> I did not choose; perhaps I ought to have chosen?
> I was told to go and I went. I killed; I was killed.
> Did any of us deserve it? I don't know.
> You can stand there and say your hands are clean;
> I cannot. But you were lucky. You could be meek
> And go to prison, and not take others with you.
> We who are tied in this damnable cat's cradle
> Where there is no choice except between bloody alternatives
> Have a fraternity which you know nothing about (288).

Reynolds has said that the play was written under 'the pressure of world events', including reports of concentration camps coming out of Germany and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima.[21] Sayers had written to Maurice Reckitt in October 1945 that 'it might, in the end, have been better to kill more people, or different people [...] I do not know; nor (at present) does anybody.'[22] In the same letter she says, 'The solidarity of guilt is indivisible.' Sayers felt strongly that the morality of Hiroshima was less of an issue than the fact that 'War is simply the end-product of a long process of misused power.'[23]

The Airman's speech, with its energetic and conversational manipulation of a five-stress line, has its origins in blank verse but is much freer in rhythm. This is Sayers's own vigorous voice, though it might not have been possible without Shakespeare and Eliot. 'Fraternity' echoes Williams, but the pared-down clarity of the verse's thought and expression (the only metaphor is 'cat's cradle') is distant from anything Williams wrote and helps to characterise the Airman as a plain-speaking modern man: Sayers, unlike Williams, uses varieties of register within her verse to create character. The Airman's choice between equally bloody alternatives, mediated by personal conscience and a sense of the demands of the City, will be explored

[21] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 188, editorial note.
[22] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 166.
[23] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 163.

throughout the rest of the play, first in terms that lead back to the original choice in the Garden of Eden and then restated and transformed in the context of the redeeming act of Christ on the Cross. Sayers has embarked on the task of contextualising the recent war within the architecture of salvation.

The City with its fraternity of guilt and giving is the key to redemption. The Airman wants to meet others who are contaminated with the 'exchange of blood', and he has his wish as he is surrounded by martyrs, killers, an innocent hanged for sheep-stealing, a judge who believes keeping the peace is more important than strict justice, a harlot and a wife, both abandoned by men, a child chimney sweep, a lunatic and other citizens. Dr Samuel Johnson, a native of Lichfield, interrupts the hubbub by asking the Airman what brought him back, eliciting an epiphanic vision of the City as a 'god-bearing image' in which the mundane shines within a pattern of order:

> The noise of a crowd, mysteriously unanimous,
> Like a band, each instrument playing its own tune
> To make one music; drays and buses and cars
> Moving and stopping for lights or a raised hand;
> Pealing of bells; clocks ticking and striking;
> Movement of feet and wheels on the surface of things,
> Carried triumphant on the hidden intricacy
> Of pipes, sewers, cables – the dark functioning
> Of distribution. There have been times, I say,
> When all this seemed like a miracle and a glory;
> And then, like the switching-off of a light – nothing;
> Only a crawling of maggots among carrion
> In a muddle of petty squalors. If one could find,
> Somehow, a way to make the glory endure! (293-4).

The image of humanity as a musical band, each playing a part that is indispensable to the whole, is a powerful metaphor for the individual in community and is closely linked here to the material passage of time, measured by traffic lights, clocks and the movement of the world that is carried by 'the dark functioning/Of distribution'. Technology, often viewed with suspicion by Sayers as tending to be associated with materialism, is invested with a Wordsworthian glory, becoming a medium of community through its function as part of a network of distribution. The quality of beauty frequently invoked in theological aesthetics is here unambiguously assigned by Sayers to the radiant inter-connectedness of things conventionally considered ugly. The Airman has come to the 'place of the images', the things that represented

the numinous in life for dying souls who are 'drawn to the moment of glory/By that god-bearing image, whatever it was,/That carried the glory for them' (294). For the Airman the epiphanic vision is found in his home town: 'I saw the city/Shine to me. That was the last thing I saw' (294).

The Recorder now shifts the play into overtly religious mode by asking about the Airman's claim to citizenship and whether he can recite his creed. For Sayers, responsible citizenship is inseparable from belief: '[..] every sin against society is sacrilege, because we are all members one of another, in that material body which is the body of the living God.'[24] A personal statement using the pronoun 'I', the creed is spoken in worship by a group and is thus emblematic of the play's theme that while Christ's Atonement happens once and for all and for the whole community, individuals must make it their own. The Airman is conscious of this doubleness within the affirmation of faith and although he starts mechanically reciting the Nicene Creed, when the Chorus picks it up and carries him along he breaks off with the words, 'My personal creed is something totally different' (295). Flying a plane in war is a lonely occupation demanding an extreme degree of self-reliance, and aces like Gibson and von Richthofen were famous for being individualists, cultivating idiosyncrasies which assumed a talismanic significance. The Airman starts by trying to make his own terms in a way comparable with the Airman in the Powell and Pressburger film *A Matter of Life and Death* released in the same year, and like the Airman in that film he has to submit to powers greater than the self. When the Chorus takes up the creed again the Airman concludes 'I do not understand a word of all that,' (296) and the Recorder's answer is that the Airman is not alone: 'Leave the understanding to the Holy Ghost,/The holy Catholic Church and communion of saints,/So far as they are in you, and you in them' (296-7).

In response to the Airman's alternative creed, 'I believe in man, and in the hope of the future,' the Chorus moves the play towards an exploration of the origins of sin, pointing out that the current world situation is a product of their own past hopes. The Airman is persuaded that he is part of a shared guilt but goes on:

> But I want to know why we have no choice;
> I want to know why there is no justice,
> And why it is that everything we do

[24] Sayers, *Christ of the Creeds*, 41.

> Turns to a horror we never contemplated;
> I want to know what it is all about,
> And whether the thing makes sense (299).

This is the issue the pageant has been leading up to, the place where history intersects with the eternal. Original Sin has been redeemed by Christ's action in history with eternal effect, and can be embraced by every individual who accepts responsibility for personal sin within a community of guilt and is prepared to face judgment. The pageant of *The Just Vengeance* will itself be the judgment, enclosing within itself the mystery play that reveals God's reaching out to humankind. The Airman has shown that his soul is ready for the journey insofar as he has grasped what questions must be answered. As the mystery play within the pageant progresses, the Airman will be drawn in to a recognition of and participation in the sacramentality of Christ's saving act, so that the play enacts what it describes, and as the action physically overflows into the audience they too are drawn into the drama as participants.

The Mystery Play

Sayers's dramatic and participative approach to the mystery play within *The Just Vengeance* may be examined using the approach and categories formulated by Meg Twycross, a medievalist whose theory is informed by her practice as a director of mystery plays which replicate the conditions of the original performances. We have already noted in Chapter One that Twycross identifies the liturgical elements in the York Play of the Resurrection as a means of drawing on the audience's experience of the sacred to supply the numinous element in a human performance,[25] and in Chapter Two we saw that Twycross has formulated a variety of participative levels for the kind of drama that minimises the boundaries between actors and audience. Twycross's category of responsive participant is appropriate to Sayers's *The Just Vengeance* not only because actors enter though the audience and even mix with them in the *Via Crucis*, but also because the music and other liturgical forms are a continuation of the building's primary function for worship. Her examination of the complex relationship that arises when actors and audience are in close proximity, acknowledging the dramatic illusion without breaking it, takes us back to the proposition that appropriation of a narrative involves the paradox of acknowledging

[25] Meg Twycross, "Playing 'The Resurrection'," in *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, ed. P.L. Heyworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 273-96.

its otherness, a process that in Sayers's drama is closely linked with the otherness of the sacramental sign.

In *The Just Vengeance* the enactment of the mystery is a play within a play. The characters from the preceding historical pageant split into actors and spectators, so that the church audience observes the effect of the mystery on the play audience at the same time as they themselves are making a comparable response to the play as a whole. They are simultaneously inside and outside the illusion. To Twycross's categories of processional engagement may be added the experience of sacramentality identified by Beckwith as being activated by the audience at live performances, each one of which is a unique event shaped by the audience response. While Sayers's early plays turn on the protagonist's *anagnorisis* and repentance, in her last two plays repentance is the prelude to the onstage dramatisation of a sacramental event, making the stage performance and the Church's sacraments paradigmatic of each other in their simultaneous uniqueness, universality and their power to transform. The mystery play in *The Just Vengeance* enacts the Crucifixion, which is explicitly identified as the initiating event of the Christian Eucharist.

The interest of Sayers's plays and novels, as we have seen, lies in the choices people make, and in *The Just Vengeance* Sayers dramatises the choice of belief itself. As the historical pageant ends, the Recorder dismisses five Chorus members who will later appear in the mystery play as Caiaphas, Pilate, Herod, Judas and a Soldier, drawing attention to the character of a mystery play as a community drama. The changes in costume were symbolic so that the audience was aware that the pageant characters were now performing a play within the play. The curtains behind the arch on the upper platform now open to show Eve and her daughter Mary, the second Eve, doing traditional women's work: sewing the veil of the Temple, which symbolically looks ahead to its tearing at the Crucifixion. Behind them at a higher level is the entrance to Heaven, with pierced double doors that let the light shine through. Sayers is invoking a long Christian tradition in which the Veil of the Temple symbolises the Incarnation and the boundaries between earth and heaven, flesh and spirit.[26] The scenes of Old Testament history traditionally embroidered on the back of the veil represent a chronological sequence but all are simultaneously present, and in this respect they

[26] Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2003), 188-228.

may be considered paradigmatic of the salvation narrative within *The Just Vengeance*. The mystery play is the gate to the spiritual both for the Chorus members who form the onstage audience, and beyond them for the nave audience, and during the mystery they are all physically looking upstage the same way (Fig. 10, p. 156).

Sayers reverses gendered stereotypes in order to allow Eve to be a theological commentator on the action for the Airman and the audience, while Adam assumes the role of the ordinary person caught up in events beyond his comprehension. The lively dialogue that opens the scene, in which Eve ascribes her sin to intellectual curiosity, announces a reappraisal of the story. Eve moves down from the Upper Stage to explain, in terms reminiscent of the discussion of 'knowing good as evil' in *The Devil to Pay*, how the first fatal choice transformed their understanding:

> But after we had eaten the sad fruit [...]
> We knew doing and making as labour and sorrow
> Love as possession and lust and jealousy,
> Difference as hatred, blessed luck as envy (302-3).

Cain's killing of Abel introduces the theme of justice, prompting the Recorder to locate guilt within the community rather than with individuals:

> Every man and every woman of you
> Is the whole seed of Adam, not divided
> But fearfully joined in the darkness of the double self.
> [...] Do not you all
> Suffer with Abel and destroy with Cain? (313-4).

At this point the Chorus members become 'responsive participants' to the play within the play, and their closeness to the audience means that they speak for all present in claiming that 'We are Abel'; 'We are Cain' in an antiphonal sequence culminating in Fox's 'Vengeance is mine, saith God; I will repay'(314). If the whole community is implicated, only God can judge.

It is Eve who articulates the frightening implications of a demand for God's justice, pointing out that human vengeance is modified by the taker's awareness of his or her own sins, while God need have no such inhibition:

> But what sort of dreadful thing
> Can be the vengeance of the innocent,

> Who, being all wronged, need not subtract the score
> Of his own debt from the appalling total? (315).

Eve's function as commentator is to move the action on by making theological connections that telescope the lengthy narrative of salvation, and she supplements the Recorder's narration in the same way as additional guides supplement Virgil during Dante's journey. When Adam protests that the demand for strict justice is central to the working of the state and religion, Eve replies that there is a different way, 'a kind of mercy that is not unjust,/A not unmerciful justice' promised by God in the form of 'a Man,/The image of his argument bodily' (315-6). They kneel down and pray for a vision of this future event as the Upper Stage opens to disclose the gates of Heaven and all the actors turn towards it.

We have seen that penitence is a necessary preliminary to William's and Faustus's apprehension of the truth, and here, in the dramatisation of universal guilt, penitence takes the form not of confession but of a communal Litany of repentance, starting with Adam's 'From the blind skill that has no understanding,/the knowledge that has no wisdom [316]' to which the Chorus gives the response 'Deliver us, good Lord'. At this point, half-way through the play, liturgical speech starts to dominate, led by Adam, who is both a character within the play and representative of the stage audience who perform the liturgy. While the choral speech is part of the narration, the Choir's role is to reflect the onstage mood in meditations similar to the arias in a Bach Passion. "Open the gate" is a lyric for the Choir in free verse expressing in word-play and dissonant music the contemporary dilemma:

> […] State terms, state conclusion, state decision,
> Speak the name of the City. Open the gate,
> Throw open the gate, throw
> Open the gate, show
> The image of truth in the place of the images, show,
> Show! (317-8).

For ordinary people the State is the focus of the legalistic justice they demand, as it is for Adam, and Sayers, who through Eve has already called that demand into question, draws attention to its complexity in practice with the neat punning of 'State terms, state conclusion, state decision' in which the abstraction 'order in the State' is elaborated into the constituents of a formal negotiation. The verse ends with the threefold repetition of '(throw) open the gate' in a syncopated rhythm which the

composer echoed in the music. Following the playing out of an Old Testament approach to justice Eve has dramatically shown the way for the New Covenant to be revealed, and the Choir echoes the transition.

This musical and visual climax half-way through the play marks the entry of Christ into the world and the beginning of redemption. For the audience who sat through a three-hour production without a break such markers would be necessary to give a sense of development to a play that is held together by theology. The gates on the Upper Stage have remained shut and this is the cue for them to open, providing a further depth of visual focus and reinforcing the audience's sense of sharing the revelation with the characters on the Lower Stage. The critic Alan Fairclough found the effect impressive: '[...] the curtains of the upper stage divide to reveal Heaven's Gates resplendent against the West window, and these in their turn opening, disclose, crowned in all the braided glory of Byzantine apparel, the Persona Dei, flanked by Gabriel and another angel';[27] the reviewer in *The Stage* wrote: 'Magnificent in voice and figure, Raf de la Torre stands, a commanding presence, over the woes of the world as Persona Dei.'[28]

The Persona takes the part of God as both Father and Son during the drama that follows, making the point that the members of the Trinity are a unity:

> I the Image of the Unimaginable
> In the place where the Image and the Unimaged are one,
> The Act of the Will, the Word of the Thought, the Son
> In whom the Father's selfhood is known to Himself,
> I being God and with God from the beginning
> Speak to Man in the place of the Images (318).

The oxymoron of the Unimaginable Image draws attention to the nature of language about God: Sayers's repetition of 'image' and 'unimaged' throughout the play is the equivalent of Williams's 'This also is Thou; neither is this Thou' in *Seed of Adam*.[29] The use of verbal paradox is thus embedded in the theological enterprise of exploring the Atonement, including the Father's self-knowledge through the Son, which we

---

[27] Alan Fairclough, "Dorothy Sayers and Religious Drama in England: *The Just Vengeance*," *Christian Drama* vol. I, No 1 (November 1946): 3.
[28] Quoted in Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 94.
[29] Charles Williams, *Seed of Adam and Other Plays*, ed. Anne Ridler (London: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1948), 12-13.

have seen is a key point in Sayers's Trinitarian analogy of creation. The speech recalls the opening of the Barkers' play which opens the York mysteries:

> I am gracious and great, God without a beginning;
> I am maker unmade, and all might is in me.[30]

In *The Just Vengeance*, the alliterative style characteristic of the fifteenth century mysteries is not only a practical aid to memory but makes the point that this is a play within a play and that the whole drama has a timeless resonance. The place of the Images is both the sanctum of the Temple and the two plays being performed in front of it: the mystery within the pageant, and the whole cathedral drama in the here and now.

The Persona announces that this is a theological exploration of the Incarnation by asking Adam and Eve to understand that 'when you chose to know evil/In your way and not in Mine, you chose for Me [...] And since you would not/Submit to God, God shall submit to you' (319). Eve again is the figure who moves the action on, anticipating the Airman's later submission by being the first to ask 'What must I do?' The answer is that Mary, daughter of Eve, lives at the threshold between time and eternity and will make Eve's choice for the second time. In *Seed of Adam* time is telescoped; in *The Devil to Pay* there are two parallel timescales; here time has no existence. Theologically speaking, submission freely offered is the key to redemption, whether by Mary at the Annunciation or by the Persona in assuming humanity. The Persona becomes Jesus, dressed in an alb, as he descends from the Upper Level, saying, 'Now I put off My crown and majesty/To take the vesture of humility' (321). Rowan Williams has written that 'God's act in Jesus forestalls the betrayal, provides in advance for it: Jesus binds himself to vulnerability before he is bound (literally) by human violence.' His entry into human life is paradigmatic of his gift of himself in the bread and wine of the Eucharistic community: '[…] the symbolic end-point is the community created and bound together by an external assurance, something not evolved or negotiated, something that precedes and outlives particular fractures and failures (betrayal, denial). […] God's promise to be faithful, even in advance of betrayal, points towards a community whose bonds are

[30] J. S. Purvis, ed., *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Shorter Version of the Ancient Cycle* (London: SPCK, 1951), 15.

capable of surviving betrayal, and which thus can have no place for reprisal, for violent response to betrayal and breakage.'[31]

Jesus's entry into the world is one of two moments of passing through the veil, both of which are marked in liturgical mode. The invitation to the audience to draw on their own experience of the sacred is here reinforced by echoes of familiar quotations:

> RECORDER
> O widowed city, wake! Beneath thy stones
> A whispering wind goes stirring the dead bones.
> GABRIEL
> Rise up, dear city of God, rise up; receive
> The second Adam from the second Eve (322).

In these allusive lines Jeremiah's Lamentation (1.1) and Ezekiel's dry bones (37.3) meet an echo of Eliot with the word 'stirring' ('memory and desire' in the opening lines of *The Waste Land*),[32] and Gabriel's words combine Augustine's City with the Song of Songs, while the reference to Jesus as the second Adam evokes Newman's 'A second Adam to the fight' ("The Dream of Gerontius") or more distantly Romans.5 and Donne's 'Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me' ("Hymn to God, My God, in My Sickness").[33] The passage ends with a direct translation of St Bernard's prayer from the *Paradiso* (XXXIII 1- 6):

> CHOIR
> Thou art that she by whom our human nature
> Was so ennobled that it might become
> The Creator to create Himself His creature (322, Sayers's translation).

Sayers's use of verbal paradox to underline the mystery of Atonement theology draws on a well-established literary tradition.

When heaven's gates are shut on Gabriel, the Persona remains on the human side to enact Jesus's ministry. The Chorus of Lichfield citizens is now the crowd in the

---

[31] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 217.
[32] Eliot, *Poems*, 61.
[33] John Donne, *Complete Verse and Selected Prose*, ed. John Hayward (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1972), 321.

biblical narratives, with the Airman forming a link between the historical characters and the audience. A photo shows the Chorus sitting on the steps listening to Jesus just above audience level and with their backs to them, a clear indication of continuity between audience and actors (Fig. 10, p. 161). Time is telescoped and identity conflated in a narrative technique reminiscent of *Seed of Adam*, exemplified when Eve appears with Abel whom the Persona raises from the dead, as if he is the widow's son in Luke 7.11-17 (326). Again it is the Airman's questioning that drives the action forward as he asks, 'Was it worth while – forgive my bluntness, sir -/That God should be made man, only to say/To man, "Be perfect," when it can't be done?' (329). This is the pivotal question that will turn scepticism into faith and spectatorship into participation, going as it does to the centre of Atonement theology. The surrender he has witnessed in the Incarnation can now be made real by God working in him: 'Only Myself can keep My Law in you' (329), but the sinner's identification with Christ has to be completed by sacramental union: 'I must be closer to you than your marrow [...] I say, unless you eat My flesh and blood/And make My substance and My self your own,/You cannot live' (329). Finally the Airman asks 'Is there no other way?', becoming Christlike in an echo of Gethsemane.

The mystery play on stage models the way *The Just Vengeance* as a whole is working on its audience, and the echo of Gethsemane underlines the fact that Jesus within the mystery accepts the path ahead at the same time as the Airman comes to the point where he is willing to let God work in him. The trial scenes have been criticised for a lack of clarity, but photographs suggest that space was very limited on the Upper Stage where Jesus is interrogated by Caiaphas, Pilate and Herod in quick succession. The dramatic and theological climax comes with the Chorus's final shout of 'Crucify!' from below: the Airman is shouting with them, and when the Chorus stops abruptly he is left shouting on his own. This intensely dramatic moment as the echo dies away embodies the fact that the choice to crucify Jesus starts with Original Sin: the Airman shares humanity's weakness even though 'I can't think what came over me' (337). Individual sin is located within a community of guilt, and every member of the audience must have asked themselves at this point whether they would have been shouting along with the others. Discussing the emotional response

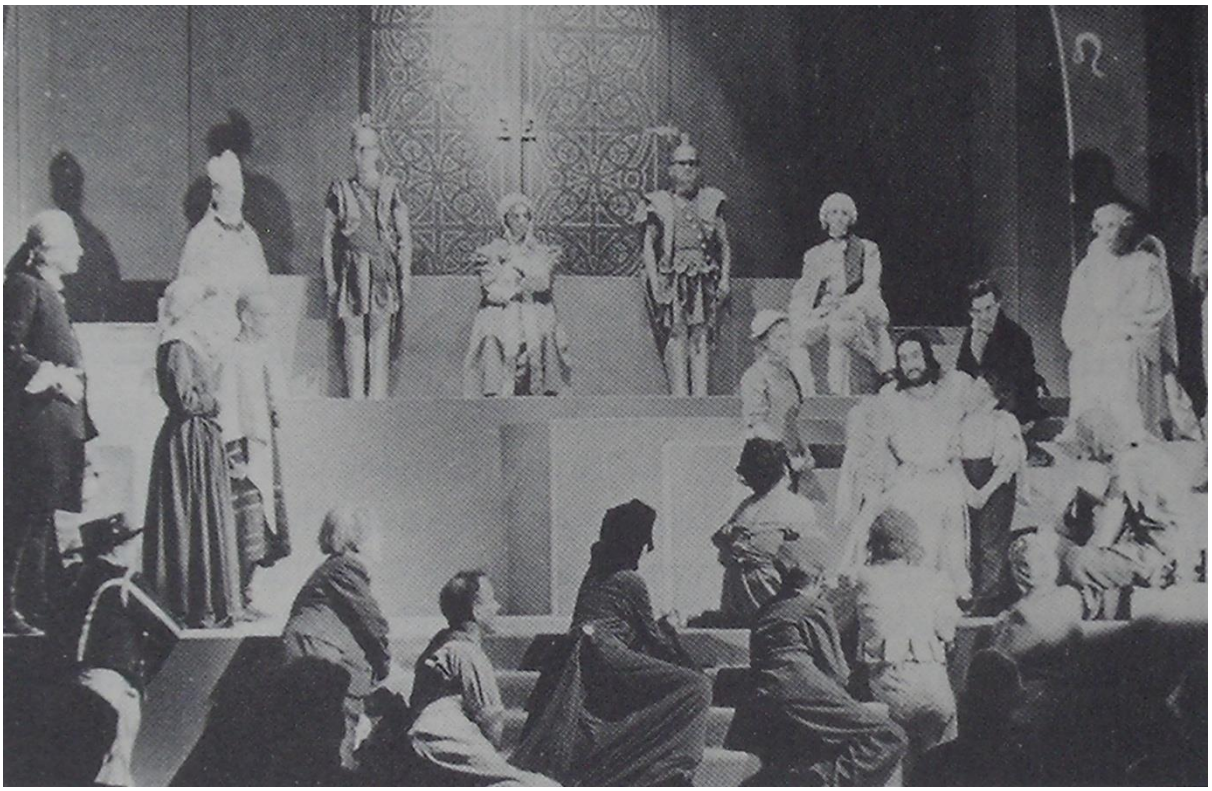
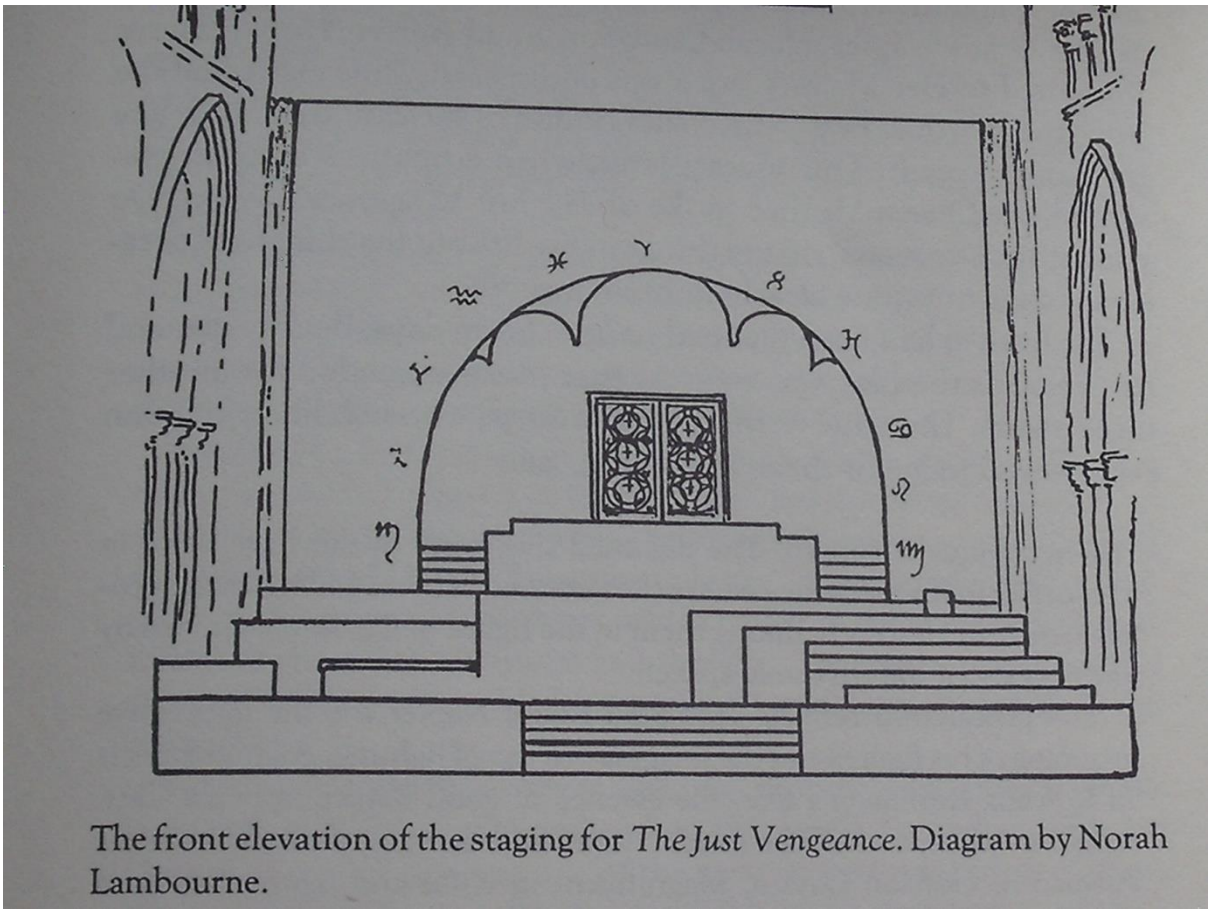


Fig. 10. Jesus's ministry from *The Just Vengeance*.



The front elevation of the staging for *The Just Vengeance*. Diagram by Norah Lambourne.

Fig. 11. *The Just Vengeance*: Norah Lambourne's set design.

of audiences to the York "Resurrection", Twycross says that 'Audiences are […] vulnerable to each other's emotion. Standing in an open-air crowd, you cannot isolate yourself and your reactions from those of your neighbour.'[34] Twycross also makes the important point that

> […] A 'good' character who doubts, or is mystified, or who gets things unwittingly wrong, and 'soliloquizes' about it, is in this kind of staging [where there is no major barrier between audience and acting area] actively calling on the audience for help. […] The audience respond with a feeling of active support […] What they do not realize is that in drawing out this support, the playwright is making them give emotional consent to their own convictions – 'strengthening their faith'.[35]

Paradoxically the Airman's vulnerability to a life-destroying suggestion is a powerful draw on the audience's sympathy.

As the trials and Crucifixion of Jesus unfold within the mystery, the characters follow the trajectory determined by their choices. The next section will be the Judgment and dismissal of those who are unequivocally damned. The sinner is free until the very end to choose the redemption offered by Jesus but when Judas sees, as Faustus does, that suffering is inevitable whether or not he repents, unlike Faustus he chooses irrevocable damnation. When the Persona offers to bear his guilt Judas's response is 'No-one can help me; I do not want to be helped' (339), a rejection of Jesus's unlimited forgiveness that Sayers also used in *The Man Born to be King*. In the litany that follows, Cain is the incantatory Dantean voice evoking a hell in which loathing and desire are inseparable. Convicting Judas, Pilate and Caiaphas for failures in hope, faith and charity he says to Judas:

> There is a place in the desert for them that refuse hope,
> Where one may lie for ever and hug the thing that one hates,
> And fear becomes desire in the final fixation of choice (339).

This is reminiscent of Sayers's description of the passage into Hell through Acheron:

[34] Twycross, "Resurrection," 285.
[35] Twycross, "Resurrection," 278-9.

> The dead souls […] hate what they chose, yet because they chose it they cling to it, as the drunkard clings to drink or the lecher to lechery [...] Their will consents to judgment.[36]

Pilate responds with the comic urbanity of the man of the world (perhaps echoing Gerald in *The Family Reunion* or the Knights in *Murder in the Cathedral*), providing a release of tension before the final resolution:

> One is always at the mercy of events and the world-situation;
> One takes the thing as one finds it and makes the best of it:
> I do not believe there are any ultimate standards (339).

While Pilate has lost the good of the intellect in a caricature of contemporary liberalism, Caiaphas is in complete denial, claiming that he has kept the Law 'and been perfectly right throughout' (340).

> CAIN
> There is a place
> In the desert for those that have lost the good of the intellect;
> Fathomless circles of perfectly meaningless nonsense –
> [...] This way, brothers;
> Here we receive exactly what we have chosen
> And can practise on one another to all eternity.
> [*Exeunt* Cain, Herod, Pilate, Judas *and* Caiaphas *under the stage* (340).

Both Caiaphas and Pilate are guilty of not paying attention, the sin of Judas in *The Man Born* and a means of separating the sheep from the goats in both Sayers's novels and her plays. The Airman, as we shall see, has achieved the good of the intellect by listening carefully to what he needs to do, even if, paradoxically, it means relinquishing the intellect's control. Sayers's Judgment wrestles with the place of the individual within the salvation offered by the community in every age.

The departure of those for whom damnation is 'consequence, not judgment' leaves a different atmosphere on stage among the Chorus. They are capable of redemption and for this reason are privileged to witness the Crucifixion, but they still need to work out their salvation. The Recorder voices the dilemma:

---

[36] Sayers, "The City of Dis," in *Introductory Papers on Dante* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1954)), 133.

> What will you do, citizens, what will you do?[37]
> Since you cannot put down injustice without the Law,
> And the Law is of sin, and turns to sin in your hands,
> Because each one of you is at once Abel and Cain? (341).

This is what the Airman earlier called 'this damnable cat's cradle/Where there is no choice except between bloody alternatives'. Audience members who have emotionally identified with the Airman's questions now have the opportunity to appropriate the solution he finds through God working in him. That solution is the sacrificial self-giving of the Crucifixion, made possible through the coinherence and exchange of the Incarnation, and the Chorus will enact the process of exchange on the Lower Stage and at ground level, with only the boundary of stage convention between them and the audience. When the Persona explains that 'God, being made man,/Must walk the road that man chose for himself,/Carrying man's sin and innocence to the cross' (341), the Chorus is ready with an insistent refrain: 'Bind on the back of God the sins of the City [...] Bind on the back of God the laws of the City; […] The school, the asylum, the spires of the cathedral,/The Courts of Justice, the police, the prison, the dock,/ [...] The state and the standards, the shambles and sewers of the City. [*The Cross is laid on the back of the* Persona Dei, *and He is led away about the church by the* Soldiers, Adam, Eve, Abel *and* Mary *following, with four Singers*.]' (342). We have seen that for Sayers the *Via Crucis* was the play's centre. Norah Lambourne explained:

> We had a very lightweight wooden cross made, which was taken from the upper stage where the trial took place [...] with the Persona carrying the Cross, until He falls at the foot of the steps onto the main floor. The crowd have been following, and they then come round Him and all want to carry the cross. But it is the airman eventually who takes the Cross and carries it back to the upper stage with the crowd again following.[38]

The Airman is now Simon of Cyrene and the audience members in the nave effectively join the actors in becoming part of the crowd. One of the play's reviewers singled out three moments of 'complete poetic clarity' which included 'particularly, the progress of Christ […] to the Cross, from the stage, and through the audience'.[39]

---

[37] Possibly an echo of Acts 2.37 in the Authorized Version, where the people who hear Peter preaching realise that they have killed the Messiah in a community of guilt.
[38] Lambourne, "*The Just Vengeance*," 44.
[39] *The Manchester Guardian*, June 17, 1946, 3.

This is the moment when the spectacle of redemption becomes an invitation. God has done his part, and the actors' procession round the church will collapse the barriers between players and spectators. The Recorder speaks to everyone present when he asks:

> Who will carry the cross and share the burden of God
> Now, in the moment of choice when the act and the image are one? (343).

The identity of act and image is a description of a sacrament; in *The Just Vengeance* the Crucifixion of Christ is the act that institutes the Eucharist, where act and image will be one for its participants. We have seen that at Malvern Sayers subscribed to the sacramentality of the whole of creation propounded by Temple, though later that year in *Mind* she identified a more participatory way in which humans encounter the divine in her Trinitarian analogy for artistic creativity. In *The Just Vengeance* the Airman moves from the epiphanic sacramentality that sees a glory in 'pipes, sewers, cables' to the participatory choice to share in Christ's sufferings. Within the play's genres, the movement from pageant to mystery reflects the same dynamic. In the final section of the play the audience sees the Airman responding to the last words of Jesus on the Cross so that his final surrender mirrors that of Christ, and as the protagonist moves from spectator to participant in the play within the play, the audience of the play as a whole is engulfed in music and liturgy that makes them potential participants in the Eucharist that is being instituted on stage. In *The Emperor Constantine* we shall see the most complete example of the act and image becoming one in the onstage enactment of the sacrament of baptism, an 'ostension' in which what is signified is outwardly the same as what appears on stage. In *The Just Vengeance* the initiation of the Eucharist elicits a response from the Airman that is paradigmatic of the infinite number of participatory responses that will take place down the ages.

The timelessness of Christ's transformative sacrifice within the diachronic flow of earthly time is demonstrated visually as the pageant characters from different periods in history run forward to claim the elements of the total burden that constitute their own suffering: the Harlot will carry the shame, the Wife the bitterness of betrayal, the Lunatic 'the fear that shatters the heart and brain' (344). The scene enacts the words of the play's epigraph which are now sung: 'Whoso will carry the Cross, the

Cross shall carry him' (344). Rowan Williams writes of the social implications of a sacramental theology:

> The search for my or our good becomes the search for a good that does not violently dispossess any other – and this is not on the basis of rights whose balance must be adjudicated, but because of a conviction that the creative regard calling and sustaining myself is precisely what sustains all. And what makes this something different [from] an imposed collectivism is the fact that it is appropriated by no force but by trust, by the recognition of the hidden unities of human interest: our own transition, our own 'passover', into the need of the other, wherever and whoever the other may be.[40]

For Williams, as for Sayers, the Eucharistic vision transforms society. Although *Mind* and Malvern were explicit contributions to a debate among church people about how society should be ordered after the war, Sayers's most powerful answer to this question is in the action of *The Just Vengeance*.

The reintroduction of the Chorus as initiators of action marks a return to the pageant mode with which the play started, though the pageant procession is part of the Crucifixion that is the climax of the mystery. The fact that each Chorus member chooses the element of suffering that has meaning for him or her reminds us that the Airman returned to Lichfield because for him the city of his birth carried the god-bearing image. The structure of the Airman's conversion may have something in common with Dante's ascent above the cornices to the top of Mount Purgatory, where he finally sees Beatrice, who is the god-bearing image for him.[41] Dante has to acknowledge and repent of his sin towards Beatrice in order to see the Earthly Paradise that is the gateway to heaven. In a comparable way, the Airman has to allow God to work in him as a preliminary to the final surrender, and those who are damned do not witness the Crucifixion. Although the enactment of the Crucifixion in *The Just Vengeance* is on the face of it very different from the Beatrician Masque, they both act as a signifier for and herald of the Mass, which is the means whereby the living participate in the heavenly banquet. Both the mystery play and the Beatrician masque are staged performances within a larger narrative, and this draws attention to the fact that the god-bearing images, the City for the Airman and Beatrice for Dante, are not fixed symbols but are adopted by the actors for the benefit of these particular protagonists.

---

[40] Williams, *Christian Theology*, 219.
[41] Sayers, *Purgatory*, 298-330.

The Airman at the foot of the steps takes the centre at the end of the play. It has been his story as a representative of every person, but now he is part of a worshipping community, and the willingness to surrender is complete in him because he has paid attention in a process of hermeneusis:

> Sir, I understand now what I ought to do.
> Am I too late to bring to the wood of Your Cross
> Whatever in me is guilty and ought to be crucified?
> Whatever, being innocent, is privileged to die in Your Death? (345).

Salvation is effected within the individual who simultaneously brings to the cross both guilt to be crucified and innocence that is willing to suffer unjustly. The timelessness of Christ's sacrifice is the reason why repentance *in articulo* is valid: the Persona replies 'the moment when you meet Me is never too late,/Though the moment of death and moment of choice were one' (345). The Airman's repentance, as with William and Faustus in the earlier plays, is the channel for the final surrender. In the next sequence the Airman responds to six of the traditional last words of Christ on the cross delivered from behind the curtains, and in his turn gives the cue for the next, collaborating verbally in the process of redemption and representing, as Everyman, an approach to the cross for audience members.

When the dying Persona behind the curtains of the Upper Stage says 'I thirst' the Airman replies 'If it will serve, then all I have is Yours -/If there is anything left in me at all/That was not always Yours' (348). With this final surrender the Persona cries out, 'It is accomplished./Father, into Thy hands I commend My spirit.' The drama of the soul's choice has been accomplished in both Christ and the Airman, who now says, in a final reference to the pilot's dependence on control:

> This is it. This is what we have always feared –
> The moment of surrender, the helpless moment
> When there is nothing to do but let go [...]
> It is no use now clinging to the controls,
> Let someone else take over. Take, then, take ...
> There, that is done ... into Thy hand, O God (348).

The Airman repeats Christ's words of surrender, signalling that the Persona is now fully acting in him and that his despair at the impossibility of human perfection has been transfigured.

The Airman's letting go is central to a Eucharistic understanding of the play's action. Rowan Williams has said:

> The eucharist hints at the paradox that material things carry their fullest meaning for human minds and bodies […] when they are the medium of *gift*, not instruments of control or objects for accumulation.
> .....
> What the eucharist thus intimates about matter is that it is itself transfigured into significance in the most comprehensive way when it is dealt with in such a way as to show not dominance but attention or respect, the withdrawal of the controlling ego.[42]

The second moment of passing through the veil is again marked liturgically as the liminal figure of Mary sings a Christmas carol linking the baby Jesus's swaddling bands and graveclothes, underlining that redemption is only possible because of the Incarnation. Fox, over music, narrates the Resurrection visit of the women to the tomb as the citizens prepare to enter heaven with the Airman, as the crowd does in the York mysteries. The Angel says 'He is not here; He is risen as He said' (349) and the Persona Dei is disclosed standing before the Cross of Glory on the Upper Stage.

In the final pages of the play the Choir invokes the City as the locus of achieved redemption: 'The new name, the true name, where the King and the City are one' (349). The play ends liturgically with four pages of praise which are almost entirely sung apart from the Persona's long speech gathering up the themes in the manner, but not the language, of a mystery play:

> Shall not I keep faith
> Now with My chosen, and give you all you choose
> When you laid your will in Mine in the moment of choice
> And bade Me choose for you?
> [...]
> This is My courtesy, to make you partners
> With God in your own rescue, nor do anything
> But by your love and by your will consenting.
> [...]
> For the time of your singing is come, and My bright angels
> Unwinter hosanna in the perpetual spring;
> Where the endless Now is one with the moment's measure,
> The truth with the image, the City one with the King (350-51).

[42] Williams, "Sacraments of the New Society," in *On Christian Theology*, 218 (quoting R. Williams, *Resurrection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1982), 111).

The repeated identification of King and City emphasises the fusion of law and love, paralleled by the fusion of the historical pageant with the eternal imagery of the mystery play. The Airman and the pageant characters have made the transformative choice of self-giving in the love which fulfils the law, and as the trumpets play a fanfare they follow the Persona up into Heaven to receive a new robe and palm of gold from the Angels. The audience who may have identified themselves with the Airman in his questioning have been invited to share in his commitment, becoming 'partners with God in [their] own rescue'. Finally the Choir sings a hymn not unlike a *Te Deum*, in which the four elements praise the Lord. The concluding *Te Deum* was omitted from *Zeal* as being an anticlimax; Sayers makes sure that *The Just Vengeance* ends in a massive crescendo of praise, with phrases of theology and worship surfacing above an insistent web of sound and sight. Mary, who has remained on stage, sings 'Behold our City' and the play ends with 'Proclaim the City! Proclaim Salvation! Proclaim Christ!' The last word of the play is the first time the name Christ has been used: the action as a whole has been based on the Airman's search for Christ, without knowing that that was what he was looking for.

The Theology of *The Just Vengeance*

As we saw in Chapter Two, throughout her life Sayers was interested in why people sin and what ways out there are, if any. There is a strong continuity between her detective novels and her religious plays: Sayers's starting point is always the inevitability of sin symbolised in the Fall. In *The Just Vengeance* she gives a more complex answer than in *The Devil to Pay*. The idea of exchange derives from Charles Williams's theology, and like Williams Sayers seems to mean something different from the straightforward sacrifice of penal substitution. In *The Just Vengeance* the doubleness of Christ's Incarnate nature as God and man enables Christ to take upon him the burden of human sin, while humans in handing over their sins to be borne by Christ are in a sense participating in Christ's journey or 'putting on Christ', in the words of Galatians 3.27.

The Atonement implies exchange but Sayers distanced herself from competing theories about how it works. In 1954, addressing the Oxford Socratic Society on the subject of "Poetry, Language and Ambiguity", she surveyed the history of Atonement imagery:

> That the soul was in some sense 'made free' by Christ was a fact of experience. But it was not, obviously, a historical fact, like His birth and death and resurrection. Those you could accept, or deny, on the evidence; the experience of atonement was somehow connected with them – but how? Images for this were needed. The long religious experience of the Jews produced the image of the vicarious sacrifice; the ram in the thicket, the scapegoat, the Passover lamb; the burnt-offering and the sin-offering and the trespass-offering. To the Gentiles of the Roman Empire another image was suggested: to them a literal slavery was a reality only too familiar: it produced the image of the ransom. The rising bourgeois civilization of the Mediaeval West tended to find itself in bondage to the usurer and harassed by suits in the civil courts; the dominant image became [...] the image of the just debt.[...] In the nineteenth century, the Evangelical movement, for some reason at present obscure to me, was much obsessed with dirt, and inclined in its imagery to gather at the river and to be washed in the Blood of the Lamb. Many of those images, excellent in themselves and all founded in Scripture, have from time to time been taken with a disturbing literalism.
> [...]
> The peculiar *Angst* of our own age [...] has taken a new form, predominantly morbid and medical. This has most interestingly produced an entirely new set of Atonement images, of which the central symbol is Christ the Healer. We have, for example, Eliot's:
>
> > The wounded surgeon plies the steel
> > That questions the distempered part; [...]
> > [*East Coker*]
>
> with the Church as the 'dying nurse' and the world as 'our hospital' endowed by Adam, 'the ruined millionaire'.[43]

Explanations of the Atonement are metaphors and Sayers hesitates to ascribe an exact mechanism to the process: the soul was 'in some sense made free' by Christ. In *Descent into Hell* Williams adopted a transactional theology of supernatural exchange but in *The Just Vengeance* the essence of exchange becomes sharing rather than ransom. At the end of this passage Sayers adds 'nearly all heresies arise from the pressing of a metaphor beyond the point where the image ceases to be relevant.'[44]

Sayers made it clear in the Introduction that her Atonement theology was based on scripture (279). As we have seen, she insisted throughout her life that her theology was orthodox and that any imputations of unorthodoxy were made because she had

[43] Sayers, *Search and Statement,* 283-4
[44] Sayers, *Search and Statement,* 284.

found new ways of restating traditional belief. In 1940 she had written to Dr (later Cardinal) Heenan on this subject: '[...] when the trained writer restates an old dogma in a new form of words, the reader mistakes it for a bright new idea of the writer's own.'[45] Sayers applied the word 'translation' to her embodiment of theology in drama and was aware that there is a point at which finding an equivalent expression may subtly alter the original, but her alertness to the dangers of pressing a metaphor to its limits means that it was a trap into which she would not readily fall: 'The orthodox […] should welcome, and not be alarmed by, the translation of ancient and hallowed formulae into modern speech and contemporary action.'[46]

In giving the play a title that is a quotation from Dante, Sayers was announcing the pervasive influence of the poet whom she had already begun translating for Penguin Books. The phrase 'The just vengeance' is a quotation from Canto VII of Dante's *Paradiso*:

> Secondo mio infallible avviso
> come giusta vendetta giustamente
> vengiata fosse, t'ha in pensiero miso (lines 19-24).
>
> My unerring insight sees thee in distress;
> How the just vengeance justly was avenged –
> That is the riddle which thou canst not guess. [Sayers's translation]

Barbara Reynolds's explication of this point makes it clear that the question Beatrice here ascribes to Dante centres on the word 'justly'. If it was just in the first place that the human Christ had to die, either as a punishment for the sins of mankind or in order to pay a debt to God as reparation for disobedience to God's will, to summarise two medieval views, what need was there for further vengeance? How could a second vengeance equally be described as 'just'? The further vengeance in Dante's narrative is the historical sack of Jerusalem by the Emperor Titus in AD 70. While the history is irrelevant to the theme of *The Just Vengeance*, the phrase introduces the paradoxical nature of the Atonement about which Reynolds says, '[Beatrice] answers that, if the nature assumed by God in the Incarnation is considered, no penalty was ever so just as the Cross; but if the Person who suffered it is considered, no penalty

[45] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 180.
[46] Sayers, "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists," 111.

was ever so unjust.'[47] It was the paradoxes of Atonement theology that Sayers sought to convey in *The Just Vengeance*.

Reynolds derives Dante's view of the Atonement from Anselm's 1097 work *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why [was] God man?), which moved Atonement theory from the principle of ransom to the principle of satisfaction: death is a reparation either for the damage of sin itself or for the humiliation it inflicts on God. Central to the satisfaction theory as refined later by Aquinas was the idea of Original Sin, which Sayers dramatises in *The Just Vengeance* and which may have appealed to her because of the neat way Christ's Atonement balances the initial transgression, with Mary becoming the timeless figure of the Second Eve. Aquinas regarded Christ's death as being the answer to the Fall, but crucially for Sayers's development of the theme of salvation within a community, this did not remove the necessity for individuals to make restitution for their own sins: grace to do this was available through the sacraments, in particular the sacrament of the mass, which was in itself a re-enactment of Christ's defining salvific act. In *The Just Vengeance* the Airman comes to realise that he as an individual in community must bring his own sins to the Cross, accepting God's offer that he can become a 'partner in [his] own rescue', a phrase comparable with Etienne Gilson's assertion that in Thomist approaches to free will and liberty a person 'effectually collaborates in his own destiny.'[48]

Sayers's view of the Atonement may also owe something to the influence of Gustaf Aulen's restatement of the earlier Ransom theory in his 1931 book *Christus Victor*.[49] Aulen's Dramatic Theory of Atonement draws attention to the Atonement as a continuing process within history where the human protagonist in the present moment has a brief part to play. In the words of the Atonement theologian P.T. Forsyth: 'The vindication, the judgment, must take place within human history and experience.'[50] Forsyth's emphasis on the two categories of history and experience are realised in the pageant and mystery elements of *The Just Vengeance*, representing time and the timeless. For Forsyth, as for Aquinas, Williams and Sayers, Atonement is for individuals within the community, and although himself a Congregationalist he

[47] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 85.
[48] Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, trans. A.H.C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940), 304.
[49] Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, trans. A.G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1980 (1931)).
[50] P.T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 132.

outlines an approach that was widely accepted in the Catholic wing of Anglicanism during the first half of the twentieth century: God's love is 'directed upon the world in such a way that it should be taken home in every individual experience.'

In her discussion of *The Just Vengeance*, Reynolds quotes from Sayers's *Introductory Papers on Dante*: 'the two Natures are so inextricably united in a single indivisible Person as to make the sentence of the law wholly just and wholly unjust [...] and it is not possible to qualify either of those pronouncements in any way whatever.' [51] Reynolds perhaps feels that the legalism of this does not do justice to the vitality of her friend, and quoting the epigraphs to the play adds:

> Perhaps not, but there was something to be added, something she herself added in her play: man's response to God's sacrifice, a willingness to accept and offer up suffering in turn. She was well acquainted with St Paul's teaching on the subject: God's redemptive act was perfect and sufficient, but man's imperfection and insufficiency endure. We must therefore be partakers of Christ's sufferings that we may partake also of his Resurrection.[52]

Reynolds compares the Airman's journey with one of the deathbed conversions of the *Purgatorio*, that of Buonconte da Montefeltro:[53] 'The Airman in *The Just Vengeance* is a modern Buonconte. Confused, unable to reconcile himself to the suffering of the world, he professes a humanist's belief in progress and tries to reject the past. Like the souls on the Mountain of Purgatory, he is shown the truth in a series of images, until at last he understands his relationship to humanity and his descent from Adam and Eve.'[54]

The Just Vengeance in Performance

The play's impact as a big post-war community event is the overall key to its reception. It was a magnificent spectacle with a dynamism resulting from the intercutting of dialogue between different groups of people, a technique developed in Sayers's radio plays, the sonorous and sometimes dissonant vitality of the many sung passages, and the enveloping effect of the scenes which took place among the audience in the nave. Most of the musical sections, which incorporated not only a large choir and string quartet but the power of the organ, are followed by dialogue

[51] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 87.
[52] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 87.
[53] Sayers, *Purgatory*, 105-6.
[54] Reynolds, *The Passionate Intellect*, 88.

with just a few voices, and the effect of sudden quiet in the echoing cathedral must have been electrifying. The scenery painted in blue and gold, the dramatic lighting and Napier's grouping of the crowd in blocks of colour made a powerful visual impression. For one critic, 'Mr Napier may be said to have built the play into the very fabric of the cathedral. Soaring pillars and broad ornate ceiling are at one with the climbing stage, and the coloured pageantry on its different levels is ordered with an expressiveness which enables the eye to perceive answers to questions which have puzzled the ear.'[55] Lambourne recalled that 'the audiences used to go out in stunned silence,'[56] and Brabazon says: 'For those whose background enabled them to appreciate the significance of the story, and for many who didn't worry too much about that but responded to the general impression and the splendour of the production, it was an unforgettable experience.'[57] Hopkins, whose music was said to have 'thundered with astonishing antiphonal effect from organ, orchestra and choir'[58] notes that 'the performance was on a Wagnerian time-scale, nearly three hours without a break.'[59] Brabazon's biography criticises the play's structure for the absence of 'a simple, naturalistic storyline',[60] but I have tried to show that in performance the telescoped narrative of redemption had an additional momentum partly structured by the Airman's questioning and partly deriving from changes of focus, between dialogue and music and between different groups of actors.

Sayers's written style has been dismissed as derivative in general books about the drama of the period: in 1961 Weales led the way by referring to her 'infelicity with verse' in his discussion of *Zeal*, comparing *The Just Vengeance* unfavourably with the work of Williams and Eliot.[61] My view throughout this study has been the opposite, and I have quoted at length in this chapter to support my argument that Sayers's verse does not evince infelicity or unoriginality. At its best her dialogue has an expository clarity (see the Airman's first long speech above) which is completely different from Williams's cloudy explosions of metaphor in *Seed of Adam* or *Cranmer*, though, as we shall see in the next chapter, Williams used a clearer style for his episodic 1939 pageant play *Judgement at Chelmsford*. Sayers used different

[55] *The Times*, June 17, 1946, 6.
[56] Lambourne, "*The Just Vengeance*," 45.
[57] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 239.
[58] *The Manchester Guardian*, June 17, 1946, 3.
[59] Hopkins, *Beating Time*, 125.
[60] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 239.
[61] Weales, *Modern English Drama*, 167, 177.

registers to develop character and her versatility may have misled readers into thinking she lacks an individual voice, but a range of expression is essential to a dramatist and is a respect in which she might be favourably compared with Williams and even Eliot. The section of verse discussed above, 'Open the gate!' (317), is remote in style from both, being more suggestive of Whitman in its rhythms and perhaps Joyce in its word-play.

A criticism made by several commentators is that Sayers's changes in register are awkward. I have suggested above that abrupt changes between resonant sound and comparative stillness are part of the play's dramatic effect, and may have helped to keep the audience interested over several unbroken hours. Reynolds quotes a correspondent's recollection: 'The screams of the aircrash, the vibrant tirade of George Fox and the contrastingly quiet bewilderment of the Airman made a sudden and telling impact.'[62] Twycross has commented positively on the function of the changes of register used in the York mysteries, which were 'constructed in blocks, each with one ruling emotion or mood, which is then played almost to the limits of its capacity, but with a very sure sense of just how much an audience can take before the mood has to be switched.'[63] These words are close to those used by Sayers: 'The circumstances called for a stylised presentation, moving in what may be called large blocks of action rather than in the swift to-and-fro of dialogue' (280). Changes in register also serve to underline the eternal in the everyday, a technique used by Sayers's contemporary Eliot. *The Just Vengeance* not only demonstrates Sayers's versatility as a poet but also the skill with which she dovetails form and function in verse.

Weales and other commentators make the mistake of assuming that *The Just Vengeance* is a play that continues the Canterbury Festival tradition of the thirties in which a protagonist attains spiritual insight within a semi-historical narrative. In the gap between *The Devil to Pay* and *The Just Vengeance*, however, Sayers had written *The Man Born to be King*, an epic life of Christ whose achievement as a radio drama was to involve listeners closely in the story and invite them to journey alongside ordinary people in the process of interrogating Jesus's message. She had also started to translate Dante's *Divine Comedy*, another epic that presents faith as a process

[62] Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 95.
[63] Twycross, "Resurrection," 286.

experienced through the eyes of an enquirer rather than a protagonist. Although *The Just Vengeance* is different in style from *The Man Born*, they have a shared derivation from the epic tradition combined with a participative sacramental and hermeneutical focus that is Sayers's own. The reviewer in *The Times* makes the point that this play is different from the Canterbury plays: whereas they were readily adapted to production in a theatre, at Lichfield Sayers has devised 'an inward dramatic action as dependent on an atmosphere of reverence and faith as its outward action is dependent on splendour of setting.'[64]

The Just Vengeance was an occasion-specific play and as far as I am aware has not been fully staged since 1946. The size of the cast, complexity of the staging and need for good musicians must be deterrent factors, but a further limitation is the frequent references to Lichfield and the presence of leading citizens such as Fox and Johnson in the cast. The play was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme in March and April 1947 with a number of changes of cast, but plans for a West End performance came to nothing, partly through a lack of finance, partly through the difficulty of finding a venue and also because the director, Frank Napier, who was an inspiration to the performers and who also played Fox, became ill and died in January 1949.

Although the play was well received by critics, some church people expressed reservations about the representation of Jesus by an actor. Sayers had recently broken with tradition in insisting that Jesus should be one of the characters in the radio play *The Man Born to be King*, and the Lord Chamberlain had accepted this because there was no studio audience. *The Just Vengeance* had a paying audience (see above, pp. 144-5) and although Sayers was able to avoid naming Jesus on the programme by conflating Jesus and God as the 'Persona Dei', in public performance the role of the Persona was nevertheless controversial. Fairclough found the presentation of Christ unacceptable, arguing that 'Christ can put on man; man can not put on Christ,'[65] but in practice there is considerable force in Sayers's insistence that symbolic representations undermine a belief in Christ's humanity (discussed in Chapter Seven). More importantly, Sayers's play is itself a refutation of Fairclough's argument, suggesting as it does that there can be a process of exchange in which suffering willingly embraced constitutes a sharing in the sufferings of Christ, a

[64] *The Times*, June 17, 1946, 6.
[65] Fairclough, "*The Just Vengeance*," 8.

theology supported by Romans 6.3 where those who have been baptized are baptized into Jesus's death.

When the play was in rehearsal, however, Sayers had to contend with the doubts of the Dean, Frederic Iremonger, about the appropriateness of Christ's falling under the weight of the cross, which he chose to represent as 'tumbling down in the middle of the aisle'. With the success of *The Man Born* behind her, Sayers was sure of her ground and stiffly replied, 'I am a little surprised that you should object to it, since it has formed a conspicuous part for hundreds of years in the devotions of the Stations of the Cross [...] and is what everybody must expect to see, if the Via Crucis is shown at all.'[66] It was not the first time Iremonger had encountered Sayers's powers of argument and he backed down.[67] In fact the comparison with the Stations of the Cross is central to an understanding of how the play is experienced by its audience. In the liturgical Stations the congregation moves round the church, often taking it in turns to carry the cross, participating in the meditations at each stage of the *Via Crucis*, and in enacting the story they concretise it in their own experience.[68] In *The Just Vengeance* the crowd clamours to carry the Cross on the *Via Crucis* and, as Twycross noted, when the action of a play moves into participatory mode it invites a measure of identification with the play's salvific message. As we have seen, Sayers regarded this section as theologically pivotal in its representation of the 'in-Godding' of humankind. The liturgical elements in *The Just Vengeance* bring it close to an act of worship and, more than Sayers's Canterbury plays, provide the audience with a participatory experience that is paradigmatically sacramental, drawing them into the reality of what the play describes. A programme note at Lichfield made the expectation of the audience's participation explicit:

> The play must not – indeed cannot – be judged in the same way as a play performed in a theatre. Its surroundings and its purpose alike place it in a different category. We approach it, and take part in it, with an effort of personal understanding and devotion.[69]

---

[66] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 192.

[67] Sayers had previously had a brush with Iremonger over the realism of her radio play *He That Should Come*: Sayers, *Letters Two*, 105.

[68] The historian David d'Avray has shown how medieval preaching could be concretised by the 'lived liturgical experience' of feast day observance. David d'Avray, "Feastdays and Preaching" in *Elite and Popular Religion*, ed. Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2006), 162-79.

[69] Reproduced in Horner, "A Codicil", 115.

Conclusion

The Airman's death in combat is situated simultaneously in the timeless moment of choice on the brink of eternity and also in a very precise historical context which the whole of the audience has recently experienced. The play should be seen as a major community event with a comparable function to the first mystery play revival by Martin Browne in York for the Festival of Britain in 1951, optimistically looking to the future with a strong consciousness of the damage of the war years.

The pageant that introduces the mystery play's timeless moment of salvation establishes for the audience their own place in a tradition, and the Airman, leading them in and out of the action, speaks for them all in his desire to know 'whether the thing makes sense'. Every human choice is potentially flawed and the answer is not within the human law of the state with its 'terms and conclusions' but in the concept of exchange in which Christ's offer to bear human burdens is matched by the human choice to take on the sufferings of others. The injustice of suffering is transformed by invoking love, as St Paul did with the words 'love is the fulfilment of the law' (Romans 13.10), and the source of that love is given a context in the Eucharist. In its movement from pageant to mystery and finally into liturgy, the play recruits literary genre itself as part of the pattern of its signification. The timebound moment that is the entry to eternity is not framed by genre; the genre itself is part of a dialectic.[70] The sacrament initiated within the central mystery play transforms the sufferings within the historical pageant and brings them back again in transfigured form in the final liturgical sequence with the pageant characters: 'Where the endless Now is one with the moment's measure,/The truth with the image, the City one with the King' (351). In this speech the Persona offers humanity the chance to become 'partners in rescue', invoking a vision of generous reciprocity that sounds throughout all Sayers's writings on love, both human and divine. Her friend Barbara Reynolds believed that 'The final speech of the Persona Dei, one of the most moving things she ever wrote, is an expression of her own faith and hope.'[71]

[70] Barbara Reynolds has drawn attention to Sayers's analysis, in her tribute to Charles Williams the previous year, of Dante's 'mirroring' technique in the *Divine Comedy* in which the progress from Hell to Heaven is marked by a move from realism to abstraction. Reynolds, *Passionate Intellect*, 50-1; Sayers, *Further Papers*, 28-31.

[71] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 189.

Chapter Six
The Emperor Constantine: Creed, Sacrament and Empire

Introduction

The Emperor Constantine was written for the Festival of Britain in 1951. Intended as a celebration of Britain's emergence from the war and pointing the way to a better future in technological and artistic terms, the festival was nevertheless, at least as far as the religious arts were concerned, shadowed by an awareness of issues of guilt and innocence. The Church in Germany and Italy had not stood up to Nazism as well as might have been hoped, and corporate failure was only intensified by the sacrifices of individual martyrs such as Bonhoeffer and Kolbe. The balance between the claims of the state and the individual conscience had been clearly expressed by V.A. Demant in his introduction to the published volume of Edward Alleyn lectures in 1944/5 to which Sayers contributed "Towards a Christian Aesthetic". After identifying aspects of the common culture the Allies are trying to defend, Demant says that 'the notion of the person as having a certain priority over the temporal community' was established by 'the Church, whose very existence upheld the axiom that there are some spheres of life in which the writ of Caesar does not run. The whole European tradition of what we call and value as liberty derives from a culture in which no one power was supreme.'[1] For Demant and for other contributors to the series such as Christopher Dawson, post-war renewal must be based on a Church envisaged as transcending national boundaries and guarding a principle of conscience which has priority over 'the writ of Caesar'.

The Emperor Constantine was staged in a Colchester cinema during the Festival and a shorter version, consisting mainly of the second half, transferred to St Thomas's, Regent Street in London the following year. Sayers's choice of subject for her Colchester play was not simply a gesture in the direction of the myth that Constantine's father-in-law was Old King Cole who gave his name to Colchester. During the course of the play Constantine proclaims Christianity as the state religion and struggles with the new problem of how a state church should be organised.

[1] V.A. Demant, Introduction to *Our Culture: Its Christian Roots and Present Crisis: Edward Alleyn Lectures 1944*, ed. V.A. Demant (London: SPCK, 1947), 11.

Following a plot that leads him to execute his own innocent son, he acknowledges his part in humanity's shared guilt and is baptised in the last scene. The play balances the religion of a whole community against Jesus's call for personal commitment in faith, finally asserting the primacy of individual conscience, as anyone who reflected on the tacit assent given to wartime atrocities had to do. As in *The Just Vengeance*, the faith of the individual is mediated by the community. It is interesting to note that the published version of *The Emperor Constantine* is described as a 'chronicle' but in the programme note for the shorter version, *Christ's Emperor*, performed in London the following year, Sayers calls it a 'Morality': the church setting prompts a focus on the protagonist's spiritual journey and may also have brought the audience physically closer to the action, enabling them to appropriate it.

Built round the central dramatisation of the Council of Nicaea and concluding with Constantine's deathbed baptism, the structure of the play reflects the balance of creed and intellect against sacrament and spirit in the life of the believer. There is a further element of contemporary significance to this story dramatised at this time. Constantine ruled an empire which was long past its zenith and which was fragmenting politically, as Sayers's telling of the complex story of Constantine's rise to power testifies. He calls the Council of Nicaea because of a commitment to Church unity, and behind that unity we are aware of the centrality of political unity in his thinking. Britain itself was in the process of reversing the empire-building of the previous century, and the burden of empire was high in public consciousness. According to Adrian Hastings, 'British society was in reality changing fast in the 1950s and woe to them who failed to see beneath the drapery of tradition the emergence of a new and unimperial age.'[2] In *The Emperor Constantine*, Sayers dramatises the regeneration of a failing empire under the banner of Christianity, and although historically Sayers knew the conclusions of Nicaea were not final, the Council is presented as a triumph of unity.[3] The Alleyn lectures of 1944 and the Malvern conference of 1941, in both of which Sayers participated as a speaker, had envisaged that post-war renewal could and would be based on a recommitment to the Christian life. With its balance of personal conscience against state religion, *The Emperor Constantine* is a powerful contribution to the ongoing debate. I shall argue

[2] Adrian Hastings, *A History of English Christianity*, 1920-1990 (London: SCM Press, 1991), 416.
[3] According to Diarmaid MacCulloch, Constantine 'may have come to realise that the *Homoëusion* which he had effectively imposed at Nicaea was an obstacle to his aim of unity in the Church.' Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 215.

that in giving theological primacy to the personal, and in the literary sphere using realistic prose dialogue, Sayers showed herself to be aware of emerging currents in the unimperial age.

Sayers brought to her religious beliefs a fierce intellectual engagement which we have seen in her lifelong emphasis on the creeds. In the wider Church, however, the logical structures of systematic theology were under attack in the fifties. Describing the theological world into which *Honest to God* burst in 1963, Rowan Williams has written of the Church of England's 'half-conscious complicity in the "end of ideology" mood in the wider intellectual climate'.[4] The decade was dominated by the theology of Barth with its emphasis on the unknowability of God, by Christian life defined in terms of unconditional self-commitment or by existentialism, and according to Williams 'up to the later 1970s it remained true that the consensus of academic theology was not too sympathetic to the idea that credal formulations might be a fruitful way into discussing the crises of modernity.'[5] The result was to put 'the distinctive mark of faith [...] in danger of becoming no more than its own asserted depth, sincerity or seriousness'.[6] As we shall see in Chapter Eight, in 1954 Sayers was on the defensive as she answered accusations that her religion was an arid intellectualism without room for the warmth of the heart. In fact her response is an implicit denial of dichotomy: 'the passionate intellect is really passionate.'[7] Sayers regarded her proper sphere not as the intellectual debate of radio and journalism but as the image-making of the playwright which unites head and heart:

> […] if you will only leave me in peace till some truth so takes hold of me that I can honestly show it to you through the right use of my own medium, then I will make a picture for you that will be the image of that truth: and that will be not the Creeds but the substance of what is in the Creeds. But unless it is living truth to me, I cannot make it truth to you […] [8]

It is therefore significant for Sayers's theology that, while much of *The Emperor Constantine* is concerned with the intellectual process of establishing norms of doctrine, it concludes with Constantine's personal commitment within the sacrament of baptism.

---

[4] Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004), 110.
[5] Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 114.
[6] Williams, *Anglican Identities*, 112.
[7] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 136-45.
[8] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 140-1.

During the fifties and sixties the need for a personal and emotional commitment was beginning to be accepted in the churches. In *The Emperor Constantine* Sayers anticipates that development by dramatising a progression from the ordered pattern of a state religion and the political manoeuvring involved in creating a public statement of faith towards the sacramental commitment arising out of emotional and moral need. In doing so she was not rejecting the creeds but making an 'image' of the substance of the creeds that emerges from her own passionate intellectual involvement, a creative process I have traced throughout her work as a dramatist. In choosing the Nicene Creed as the centrepiece of the play, Sayers on the face of it appeared to be running counter to the emerging culture of personal conversion, and a lack of critical engagement with this play in over sixty years since its appearance may imply that students of Sayers have taken this view subsequently. I suggest, however, that her use of the Nicene Creed in *The Emperor Constantine* can be interpreted differently: dramatising the way normative credal formulas are arrived at becomes a way of showing that the creeds have to be completed by a personal faith and a commitment to living out their implications in the world. The play can in fact be seen as a response to the way things are moving in the Church, and may even itself be regarded as a symbolic dramatisation of that movement.

Another departure for Sayers is the fact that *The Emperor Constantine* is written entirely in prose apart from the incantatory prophecies of King Coel at the beginning and end. These poetic passages framing the play's realism are reminders that a play, however realistic, invites its audience into a world of the imagination. A corollary of the use of prose throughout is that there is no Chorus to comment on the action. Although the Archangels of *Zeal*, the Chorus in *The Just Vengeance* and the angels and devils of *The Devil to Pay* do not initiate action, they mediate between the play and its audience by introducing the ritual elements which both involve the audience and preserve the sense of otherness that is central to an appropriation of the story. The absence of a Chorus from *The Emperor Constantine*, therefore, signals a different way in which the audience is expected to engage with the drama. This is a historical chronicle and, as in *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers uses conversational realism to bring characters who have a date in history out of the textbooks and into the imagination of her audience. In *The Man Born* Sayers had invited her listeners into a process of biblical hermeneusis alongside Jesus's disciples, and in *The*

Emperor Constantine there is a forensic element in a plot against Constantine to which the audience picks up the clues but Constantine does not. Sayers liked to challenge her audiences, and the theological puzzle of William's guilt in *Zeal* has its counterpart in the events leading up the Constantine's baptism. In the later play, however, the consequences of Constantine's guilt are more far-reaching and have implications for the established church.

Creed

Starting Points

The original request was for a play about Colchester's local heroine, St Helena, daughter of King Coel, but when Sayers wrote to Norah Lambourne, the play's designer, that 'the subject attracts me,'[9] she was referring not to Helena or to Constantine but to a fascination originating in childhood with Athanasius, a prominent opponent of the Arian party at Nicaea and traditionally the author of the Athanasian Creed, 'so mysterious and full of rumbling great words'.[10] Imaginatively fired by the poetry of the Athanasian Creed, Sayers was also convinced of its theological and historical significance. In 1941 she quoted its conclusion in a letter to the *Spectator*: 'This is the Catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved,' making the point is that 'it is not usually realised that the operative word here is "cannot". That is to say, the Church here brings her statement of opinion to the bar of fact, saying "Believe it or not as you choose, but what judges you will be the unalterable nature of universe".'[11] John Thurmer has pointed out that the Athanasian Creed has fallen out of favour because of its anathemas,[12] but, as we saw in the discussion of release from Purgatory in Chapter Four, for Sayers these did not represent vindictive punishment but the operation of a natural law.

Sayers had long believed that Athanasius was historically important for the survival of the Church, writing in 1941 that

---

[9] Sayers, *Letters Three*, 444.

[10] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 156. Sayers used this argument in her dispute with the BBC over whether the first play in *The Man Born to be King* series was suitable for children, as was the original intention, saying that children are the only audience 'whose minds are still open and sensitive to the spell of poetic speech' (*Letters Two*, 197).

[11] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 170.

[12] John Thurmer, *A Detection of the Trinity* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008), 74.

> 'Athanasian' orthodoxy didn't produce the Dark Ages, but was the only thing stiff enough to get through them and come out the other side. Also [...] the apparent alteration of the Church's attitude to state affairs after Constantine (with the appearance of compromise, casuistry, legality and all the rest of it) was not just naughtiness and truckling to Caesar, but a consequence of the fact that she had for the first time to accept *responsibility* [Sayers's italics] for what happened in the world and the State, and was thus brought up against the 'problem of power' in an acute form.[13]

Or to quote her introduction to the published play, 'If the Gospel was to be "preached unto every creature", then Christianity must some day cease to be a cult of a minority, and the power of purse and sword must eventually come into Christian hands.'[14] In 1941, then, ten years before *The Emperor Constantine* was written, Sayers had thought about the implications of having a state religion, both for the Church's development and for the faith of the individual. The request to write about St Helena immediately suggested to her that a possible focus for her ideas within the brief was Helena's son Constantine: 'I wrote the play about Constantine rather than about Helena, because I wanted very much to do something about St Athanasius and the Nicene Council; and there didn't seem much to say about Helena, except the story of the finding of the True Cross – a subject about which I didn't think the average British audience would take much interest.'[15] Reynolds suggests that the lukewarm response to Evelyn Waugh's *Helena*[16] in 1950 may have been another deterrent.[17]

Helena appears as a character in Charles Williams's 1939 play *Judgement at Chelmsford*, which was in rehearsal when the outbreak of war caused the project to be abandoned.[18] Williams's final sections have a hieratic quality comparable with the endings of Sayers's plays: the Diocese of Chelmsford, a character in the play, is facing judgment for the kind of Christian life she has mediated, and finally, following a renewed commitment to the Cross, is received into fellowship with the

---

[13] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 332.
[14] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Emperor Constantine* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1952), 5. Further references will be given in the text.
[15] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 36.
[16] Evelyn Waugh, *Helena* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1950).
[17] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 36.
[18] Charles Williams, *Judgement at Chelmsford* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). A link with Williams's play has been discussed by Suzanne Bray in "Guilt and Glory in Dorothy L. Sayers' and Charles Williams' Festival Plays" in the *Proceedings of the Joint Meeting of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society and the Charles Williams Society, October 2009* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2010), 13-33.

older dioceses. Williams represents the marriage between Helena and Constantius Chlorus, Constantine's father, as a love match; Sayers's play starts long after their divorce for political reasons, but in the first scene Constantius visits Helena, claiming that he has continued to love her. Sayers picks up Williams's idea of a love-match and shows its vulnerability to the demands of the state, a theme which will throw light on Constantine's political alliance with his second wife Fausta and establish a background in which the needs of the state and of individuals may not coincide. In the penultimate scene of Williams's play, a sermon delivered by Thomas Ken to his parishioners performs a neat transformation of the audience into a congregation, and following Helena's finding of the Cross and Chelmsford's commitment to it, the play ends with the singing of the *Te Deum* by the Chorus and Heavenly Company. As we have seen, a *Te Deum* ends both Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Sayers's *Zeal*.

There are other respects in which *Judgement at Chelmsford* demonstrates the mutual influence of Sayers and Williams. The central scene includes a performance of an Easter play by the girls at the convent school of Barking Abbey, and their Confessor suggests that a more pious girl ought to have been chosen for Mary Magdalen. The sharp response is that the girl chosen is a better actor and 'If piety can't act, Father, piety ought not to be in a play [...] Every one of us to a proper job!'[19] These words might just as easily have been written by Sayers, who in her essay "Why Work?" took the opportunity of telling the story of the 'dear old pious [and perhaps apocryphal] lady' who asked whether the archangels in *Zeal* had been chosen for 'the excellence of their moral character', only to be told that first they had to carry 'the weight of their wings and costumes without wobbling'[20] and also be 'reasonably good actors'.[21] After that, moral qualities might be considered, foremost among which was arriving at rehearsals punctually and sober. The subject of the 'proper job' is never far from Sayers's thoughts and one of the plot threads in *The Emperor Constantine* is Fausta's boredom with her imperial role. When she enters the theological debate by comparing Jesus's sonship to 'Plato's Demiurge', Constantine expresses surprise and she retorts, 'I had *some* education before you married me' (108). Fausta's lack of meaningful occupation makes her receptive to conspiracy, but

[19] Williams, *Chelmsford*, 49.

[20] A three-minute newsreel clip of the original cast from 1937, showing the Archangels in procession outside the Cathedral, makes it clear that moving about with the wings was no mean feat. I am indebted to Tim Jones, Senior Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University, for access to this film by Sidney Bligh, and to the copyright holder Helen Jarrett.

[21] Sayers, *Creed or Chaos?*, 60.

Sayers does not absolve her of making the wrong choice; Helena leads a purposeful existence in spite of being imprisoned by the court.

Norah Lambourne lived with Sayers during the writing of *The Emperor Constantine* and has given us an account of the creative process.

> [...] sometimes the writer starts with the main theme and works backwards and forwards. Dorothy's play about Constantine started with the Council scene [...] because, she said, 'we are going to have so many bishops [...] and they must be dressed in something which will indicate their country of origin.'[22] (Figs 13, 14, p. 190)

In other words Sayers's focus on the Council scene as a starting point was not just a thematic decision but also a creative one with the visual impact of the play in mind, and with characteristic commitment she enthusiastically researched the costumes of the period and helped to make the props (Fig. 12, p.187). Sayers saw the production of a play in its totality as an experience of creativity and community: she had used it as a paradigm of Christian living when she addressed the Malvern Conference in 1941, saying: 'I do not feel about [the Church] [...] that mysterious unity which impresses beholders even though they cannot share or understand it. And yet, if I want to experience the living reality of such a community [...] I can do so immediately, merely by stepping through the pass-door of any theatre in the world.'[23] In her last two plays, she takes this further by making the sacraments and the performance of a play paradigmatic of each other.

Dramatically and theologically the play revolves round the refutation of Arianism in the Council scene in which the Nicene Creed is formulated. Sayers was aware that in reality the presbyter Arius would not have spoken at the Council, and she inserts an exchange in which the bishops agree to let him speak (131). Arius's publicly preached belief was that God's Son must have had a beginning, unlike God who is without beginning; Constantine's ecclesiastical adviser, Bishop Hosius of Corduba,

[22] Norah Lambourne, "Designing the Play," in *Proceedings of the 1990 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1991), no page numbers.
[23] Sayers, *Malvern*, 58.



Fig.12. Properties made by Sayers for *The Emperor Constantine*.

convened the Council of Antioch to stamp out the controversy but A.H.M. Jones, whose book on Constantine Sayers found 'invaluable for my purposes',[24] suggests that Antioch exceeded its brief. 'Faced with this situation Constantine took a decision which was to form a vital precedent in the relation of State and Church. He would summon a universal Council, representative of the whole Church, and he would preside over the Council himself (Figs 13, 14, p. 190).'[25] Sayers's dramatisation of the Council of Nicaea and its controversies follows Jones in stressing that Constantine's motivation in calling the Council was overwhelmingly the need for Christian unity, to which he had a strong public commitment even though he was not baptised until the end of his life. Sayers thus found a ready-made division between Constantine's public and private religious commitment which she developed thematically in the play, and Jones's emphasis on unity fitted her own ideas about what was needed in the post-war world. In concluding with Constantine's onstage baptism Sayers found that, as with her previous plays, a given story could be dramatised in such a way as to enact symbolically its own themes.

The first half of the play shows Constantine rising to imperial power by playing the game of politics with courage and flair, showing himself to be a shrewd judge of character in his military and ecclesiastical advisers but paying less attention to the members of his household. His religion at this stage is a response to the apparent efficacy of the Chi-Rho symbol in battle, and this gives Sayers the opportunity for lively dialogue in the barrack-square: 'CENTURION: Caps OFF! Company, 'SHUN! Company, PRAY!' (55). The second half of the play links Constantine's consolidation of power with the need to preside over a state church, culminating in the Council of Nicaea which unifies the Church with agreed doctrines. At the same time he is vulnerable to treachery in his own household and finally embraces the powerlessness that a catechumen brings to baptism.

The Council

Shortly after his proclamation as emperor of east and west, in dialogue with his ecclesiastical advisers, Constantine addresses the principle behind the precedent of a universal council under imperial presidency. Church councils 'where no decision is ever made final' are subject to challenge and revision. Only Constantine's hard-won

[24] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 39.

[25] A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978 (1948)), 127.

imperial authority can enforce doctrine throughout the empire, and therefore the church must become a state church in terms of its executive:

> There cannot be two kinds of justice in one realm. I am emperor of all my people, within and without the Church, and the Imperial Courts must not be made an instrument for enforcing laws which they have not made. Church and State must decide as one and execute as one, sharing as one both the odium and the responsibility. Or they must separate – a church without material power and a state without religious opinions. But not half-and-half (109).

The unity of the Church as a public institution now becomes an issue. In the same scene Constantine points out that an oppressed sect can afford to quarrel, but not an established religion with temporal responsibilities. He challenges Hosius and Lactantius:

> What will you do? Go back to the obscurity from which I raised you? and let the Holy Ghost speak once more by the blood of the martyrs? Or accept for Christ the kingdom of the world at my hands, and learn the responsibility that needs must go with rule? (110).

His mother Helena's response is to quote Jesus : 'My kingdom is not of this world,' but Eusebius logically points out that 'When all are converted, there must needs be a Christian State.' Constantine then asks Lactantius, 'What is the seat of authority in the Church? By whom does the Holy Spirit speak?' Lactantius's reply is 'By the voice of the whole body of believers.' Constantine's response is to call a Great Council of the eastern and western churches. 'I shall call that Council myself – Christ's Emperor summoning Christ's Empire; and if any decision of that Council needs to be enforced, I will enforce it. The decision itself will be made, of course, by the Bishops' (111). Constantine is on the road to organising the Church according to a secular model.

With the goal of unity in mind, Constantine is planning to propose an elastic form of words that will allow Arians to be welcomed back into the fold, but in Act II scene 1, where the anti-Arian bishops are lobbying Constantine before the Council, Athanasius persuades him against an imprecise definition by asking how he would react if someone applied the same elastic principle to his own imperial power. This is a purely political manoeuvre, but we might remember Sayers's letter of 1941, quoted



Fig. 13. *The Emperor Constantine*: The Council of Nicaea.

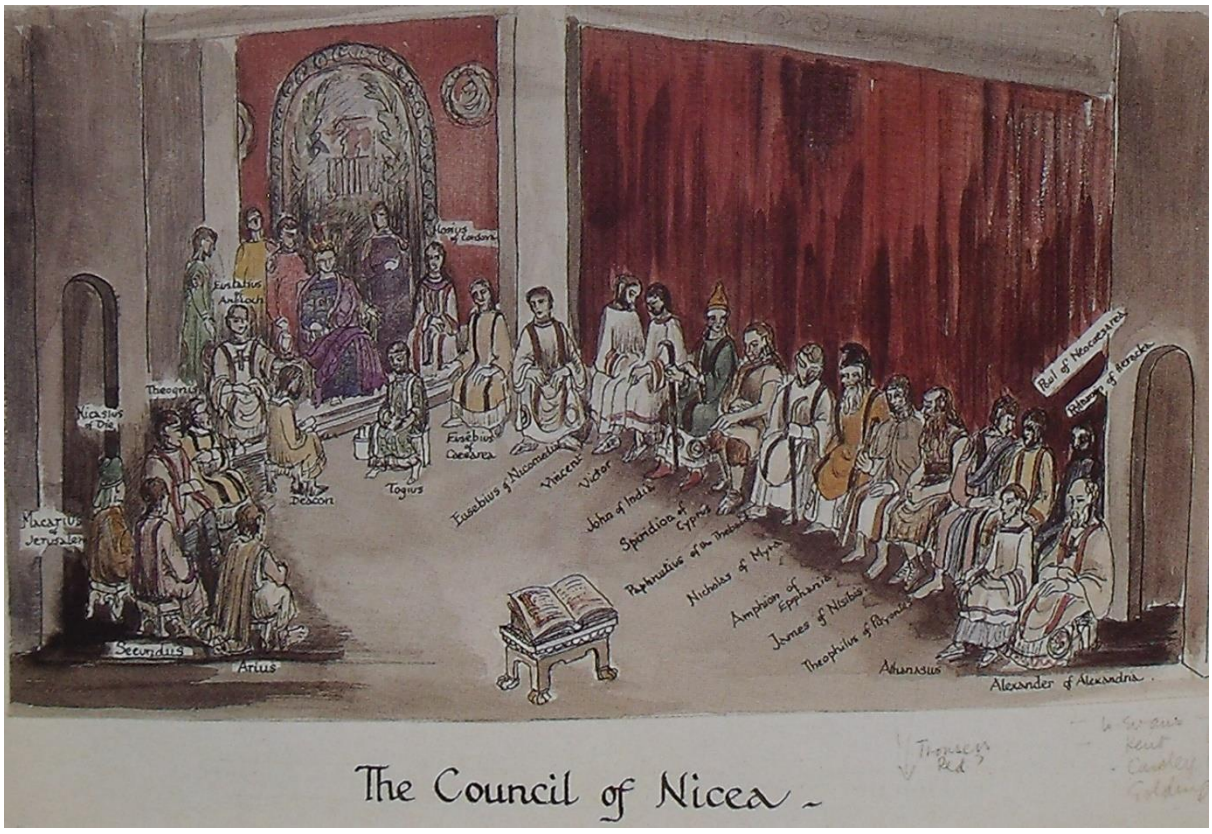


Fig. 14. *The Emperor Constantine*: Norah Lambourne's design for the Council.

above, in which she mentioned 'the appearance of compromise, casuistry and legality' that accompanies the establishment of a state religion. Sayers accepted that right belief was something which emerged from the muddle of human community, and she also accepted that credal formulations can be revised.[26] With a strong commitment to unity, she had recently accepted the failure of her own project to create an agreed statement of doctrines accepted by all mainstream churches, the "Oecumenical Penguin". John Thurmer suggests that Arianism in fact challenged Sayers's own beliefs: 'Sayers had no doubts about Arius and the views usually attributed to him. For her, they broke the unity of the pattern which was the foundation of her life and work.'[27] In spite of his inclusive instincts, in this scene Constantine is persuaded to propose the introduction of the contentious word '*homoöusios*', 'of the same substance', which is specific enough to exclude an Arian interpretation.

On the face of it, to build a play round the interpretation of a Greek theological term looks like dramatic suicide, but the significance of the term, as we have seen, is closely bound up with a larger issue of how authority is exercised in the church and state. Apart from that, Sayers knew what she was doing in terms of theatrical effectiveness. In June 1952 she wrote to the Editor of *Drama* magazine:

> Sir, I entirely sympathise with the feelings of your critic when reading my play *The Emperor Constantine*; seeing it only on paper one might well be tempted to suppose that the Nicene Creed scene would be deadly on the stage. As a matter of hard fact, however, this was the scene which in practice proved to be the 'best theatre' in the whole play. It was particularly liked by that 'common man' element in the audience which knew nothing about theology.[28]

Antonina Harbus has ascribed the play's success in Colchester to its elements of local history, but in fact the local legend does not feature largely and the argument leaves Harbus without any explanation for the London success of the play's shorter version.[29] If Sayers is right that the Council scenes were the most dramatically effective, this also suggests that local interest was a negligible factor. The *Church Times* reviewer, quoted by Hone, seems nearer the mark: 'Miss Dorothy Sayers

---

[26] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 166.
[27] Thurmer, *Detection*, 71.
[28] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 51.
[29] Antonina Harbus, "Colchester's Legend on Stage: *The Emperor Constantine* by Dorothy L. Sayers," in *Modern Drama* XLVIII, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 87-107.

"enjoys" her religion. Here she positively made her audience enjoy it too.'[30] To a correspondent Sayers wrote: 'Oddly enough, all the uninstructed ordinary people who saw the play adored the Council scene, however little they understood of it – it was a good "dog fight", and quite unlike anything they had ever seen before on the stage,'[31] and to Phyllis Potter, director of the abandoned performance of *Judgement at Chelmsford*, she wrote that the success of the *homoöusios* debate 'all goes to show either that "the dogma is the drama", or that council-scenes are theatrically sure-fire, or that novelty is always a smash-hit, or something.'[32] She was probably right that the combination of 'dog fight' and 'council' is a clue to the success of the scene. The author of this study was present at a dramatised reading of the scene by the Dorothy L. Sayers Society in 1990. Most of the audience were interested in Sayers's novels rather than the plays, but the scene gripped its watchers, probably because of its closeness to classic courtroom drama. It may also be worth noting that at the National Theatre in 2014 the centrepiece of the play *Dara*[33] was a gripping courtroom scene lasting around half an hour in which the central character defended his liberal interpretation of Islam. The audience appeared to be fully absorbed by the intellectual content.

Although the *homoöusios* debate is at first sight complex, involving variations in Greek spelling such as the difference between *homoöusios* and *homoiousios*, *agenetos* and *agennetos*, the central issue, that of whether the Son can be without beginning like the Father although begotten by him, is reasonably easy to grasp in its basic form, and in her dramatisation of the Council Sayers foregrounds that single point throughout, allowing the Arian party to comment briefly and among themselves on the acceptability of linguistic and dogmatic variations. The broad sweep of the argument is therefore accessible to the audience. History provided Sayers with a ready-made structure for the scene, in that when seeking a form of words to exclude the Arian heresy the Council worked through an existing credal template. In his account of the Council, the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius of Caesarea claims that the template in question was the one in use in his congregation and Sayers, like Jones, accepts this, though the creed offered for the Council's

[30] Hone, *Sayers*, 174.
[31] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 37.
[32] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 22.
[33] Shahid Nadeem, Tanya Ronder, *Dara* (UK: Nick Hern Books, 2015).

approval is now considered unlikely to have been Eusebius's local creed.[34] Dramatically speaking, however, the point is that working through the template allows both the personal sparring and the theology to progress simultaneously to a conclusion.

The success of the scene also depends on Sayers's talent for lively dialogue, and the style of debate might be compared with senior common room discussions in novels of academia such as Sayers's own *Gaudy Night*. The give and take has much in common with classic courtroom drama, and is comparable with the trials in Sayers's novels *Clouds of Witness* and *Strong Poison*, the judgment in the Court of Heaven at the end of *The Devil to Pay*, or the trials in Play Ten of *The Man Born to be King*. In *The Emperor Constantine* the lobbying scene which precedes the Council ensures that the audience's sympathies are with the Athanasian party, so that every point made is seen as a step towards victory. We know in advance that the use of the word *homoöusios* will nail the debate, much as a piece of new evidence does in court, and suspense is created by uncertainty as to whether Constantine will stick to his guns and use it. Harold Hobson, reviewing the London production in St Thomas's Regent Street in 1952, wrote: 'Just as one of Miss Sayers's stories becomes a charming exercise in ratiocinative deduction, so this scene turns itself into a magnificently resilient and resourceful debate such as one might hear on a distinguished visitors' evening at one of the University Unions.'[35] He adds: 'But, I must confess, the exercise seems to me to have just as much to do with religion as the debate.'

Harold Hobson spotted the fact that the immediate interest of the scene has no more to do with personal religion than a detective story has. I suggest, however, that in the architecture of the play as a whole, the element of personal engagement which audiences in the 1950s increasingly came to take for granted, and which Hobson clearly felt might reasonably be expected in 1952, is supplied in *The Emperor Constantine* by the commitment of baptism made by Constantine in the final scene. Hobson's comment on this scene is unconsciously perceptive: 'Even the deathbed baptism owes little of its effect to Miss Sayers's dramatic skill. It is moving only because it is accompanied by chanting and solemn music, which are sounds to which

[34] John Habgood, "The Nicene Creed," in *Proceedings of the 1990 Seminar* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1991), no page numbers.
[35] Harold Hobson, "Constantine: *Christ's Emperor*, St Thomas's Church, Regent St.," *The Sunday Times*, February 10, 1952, 2.

few people can listen untouched.'[36] I have argued throughout this dissertation that Sayers's sacramental understanding of creativity in general and drama in particular led her to end all her plays liturgically, and in the case of *The Emperor Constantine* she takes the incorporation of liturgy to the point of enacting the Church's sacrament of initiation. Hobson is undoubtedly right about the powerful effect of such liturgical endings, but to suggest that it happens in spite of rather than because of Sayers's dramatic skill is wide of the mark.

Individual and Community

In her discussion of the play from a postmodern perspective, Downing says, 'The Emperor comes to Christ not through the inner light of an autonomous conversion experience, but through his involvement with believers throughout his life.'[37] As I have indicated, my own view is that although Constantine's conversion at the end of the play is mediated by believers in community, particularly his mother Helena, he finally makes an independent choice in accepting the sacrament of baptism which returns him to the mediating community of believers as a participating member. Downing also minimises the element of choice in *The Just Vengeance*: '[...] even though the airman seeks to silence a creed that he no longer personally believes, its truth-effects are nevertheless a part of the community by which his subjectivity is shaped and hence will inevitably cry out through him.'[38] In Chapter Five I have argued that the Airman's final surrender, although mediated by a community's performance of belief through the creeds and liturgy, is ultimately a personal and lonely choice, taking him beyond the point where the community speaks through him and making him a modern rather than a postmodern protagonist. When he finally accompanies Jesus to the cross he is significantly alone apart from Jesus's Mother. In this chapter I suggest that like Sayers's other protagonists Constantine experiences *anagnorisis* and repentance, and, importantly, that his understanding of baptism clearly involves a personal commitment: when he signs the death-warrants for Fausta and her co-conspirators he remarks: 'How fortunate that I was never baptised! I can damn myself with a clear conscience' (179). Downing supports her emphasis on community by quoting a 1942 talk in which Sayers says '[the sacrament of communion] is never *wholly* individual. Each communicant makes and partakes of

[36] Hobson, "Constantine."
[37] Downing, *Stages*, 132-3.
[38] Downing, *Stages*, 130.

the sacrifice in the name of the *whole* Church.'[39] It seems to me that this quotation implies that the sacrament is in fact the action of both individual and community. Sayers's understanding can be illuminated with reference to Ross Thompson's discussion of Eucharistic theology which points to the balance in Augustine between the 'ecclesial mystery of the church as the body of Christ and the sacramental mystery of the body and blood', quoting Sermon 272: 'It is the mystery of yourselves that is laid on the Lord's table; it is the mystery of yourselves that you receive.'[40]

I suggest that for Sayers and contemporaries such as Temple there is no polarisation between the faith of the individual and the faith of the worshipping community. For Sayers the fact that transcendental truth is mediated for the individual through the sacramental community enables it to be expressed differently in different times and places, as we saw in her discussion of Atonement imagery. Constantine's conversion and baptism are personal decisions which take the protagonist outside the mediation of the community in order to return to it as a participating member, and this forms a continuous pattern with Sayers's other festival plays in which the protagonist's individual struggle concludes in a quasi-liturgical context where the audience is implicitly invited to identify itself with the actors as part of a sacramental community. Such a view is consistent with my locating Sayers with apologists of the time such as Demant and Temple who placed emphasis on the operation of individual conscience within the mediating community, and with writers whose concern was with 'the intersection of the timeless with time' such as Eliot, Auden and Williams.

Sacrament

One of the organisations leading the wind of change in the churches in the fifties was the Parish and People movement, founded in 1949 but, like many other contemporary schemes for reform and renewal, the product of a considerably longer gestation during the restrictions of the war years. The central aim was to make a Eucharist the principal Sunday service and to 'relate the rest of parish life integrally to that central sacramental moment'.[41] A corresponding architectural movement had begun before the war, with Ninian Comper's 1937 design at St Philip's, Cosham

[39] Downing, *Stages*, 131, quoting Sayers's talk "Worship in the Anglican Church".
[40] Ross Thompson, *The Sacraments* (London: SCM Press, 2006), 144.
[41] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 441.

bringing the baldacchino into the nave area so as to give access to the altar on all sides.[42] According to Hastings, Parish and People aimed to make worship 'at once more free, more participatory, more sacramental and more Catholic',[43] a sacramental and Catholic emphasis in line with Sayers's own belief and practice. It was an emphasis which she pursued in her dramatic writing not only doctrinally but in incorporating liturgical and quasi-liturgical elements into the structure of her plays. With *The Emperor Constantine*, the liturgical elements that in previous plays implied a sacramental understanding of what drama is and does are now embodied in an enactment of an actual sacrament of the Church, the sacrament of baptism or Christian initiation in which a group of catechumens enact symbolically the journey of Christ's death and Resurrection. As we have seen, it has a precise narrative and thematic function as the culmination of Constantine's spiritual journey. It is also consistent both with a belief among Sayers's contemporaries that religious drama itself has a sacramental dimension, and with the prevailing drive in the Anglican Church towards participative sacramentalism.

A sacramental understanding of drama may offer a way of sidestepping questions surrounding the element of mimesis in theatre, still a stumbling-block for some people particularly in America because of its association with fictionality. As we saw in Chapter One, Beckwith's section on what makes the York plays sacramental addresses the problem of mimesis as fiction by examining the nature of a sign. Beckwith argues that the Reformers' objection to the mass on the grounds that it was 'theatre', in the sense of pretence, resulted in centuries of skewed understanding of what religious plays were actually doing, and that a more fruitful approach would recognise that both a sign and a theatrical performance involve the process of standing in for and therefore pointing towards something different. Beckwith's theology of 'standing in' has something in common with Charles Williams's theology of exchange. When Beckwith describes the York Crucifixion as 'paradigmatically theatrical' (discussed in Chapter One), she equates the actor's 'standing in' for Christ in a theatrical performance with the atoning work of Christ, whose dual nature enables him to 'stand in' both for mankind and as God in the

[42] The programme for *Constantine* at St Thomas's includes a credit for the building of a 'Baldachin'. According to Graham Suter it was curtained and used to create a small rear stage. Graham Suter, "Dorothy L. Sayers on the Stage," in *Studies in Sayers*, ed. Christopher Dean (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1994), 70.
[43] Hastings, *English Christianity*, 442.

atonement process. On the face of it these two meanings of 'standing in' are different, but Beckwith's focus is on the elements of 'standing in' that share the nature of a sign, which both participates in the reality it represents and mediates participation in that reality. In an enactment of the Crucifixion the two kinds of 'standing in' are present. It might be argued, however, that there is a significant difference between them in that the actor steps out of the role at the end of the performance. While he or she may very well have been changed by involvement in the event, that change is contingent and will vary from actor to actor; the atonement event, on the other hand, which is brought about by Jesus's dual nature as he stands in for mankind and God vis à vis each other, involves a fundamental and permanent change in the relations of humans with God. It is like the actor's 'standing in' insofar as both actions concern the nature of a sign, as Beckwith argues, but in my view this comparison does not fully justify the argument that the York Crucifixion is paradigmatically theatrical. For Sayers and her contemporaries the existential 'standing in' of Christ's atonement involved the 'in-Godding' of humankind, as we saw in *The Just Vengeance*, and this 'in-Godding' is the source of the Trinitarian theology of creativity found in *The Mind of the Maker*. I suggest that the enactment of sacramental events in Sayers's plays is not only a sign or image based on a substitution, but is itself an act of creation that has a shared sacramentality with the formal act of consecration it denotes. Further, the creativity of the actors and stage team has its counterpart in the audience's imaginative participation. Theatre and theology are paradigmatic of each other in Sayers's plays because in Sayers's theology the act of creation is a sacrament.

Beckwith acknowledges that for the sacrament of dramatic action to be effective it is important that the actor's 'standing in' should be seen to be risky and impermanent, that its transient character as a sign should be recognised by the audience in order to make way for the referent. 'Theatre is constantly caught at the boundary between its phenomenality and its terms of reference.'[44] According to Beckwith, the actor's body is the chief vehicle of semiosis which, apart from the transience inherent in the role, is also subject to the risk of tripping up or missing a cue, and thus collapsing the dualities of sign and referent, presentation and representation, reality and illusion in a way that 'exploits theatre's capacity for disrupting the fixture between signs and their

[44] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 64.

meanings.'[45] The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play itself dramatises such a risk in the failure of the sheep to be convincing as a representation of a child, while the film *Jesus of Montreal* dramatises an accident which occurs during a performance of Christ's Passion. This instability is the 'mechanism of theatre's capacity for transformation'[46] as the audience is made aware of the referent through the failure of the sign, a point reminiscent of Rowan Williams's 'not-God-ness' discussed in Chapter One. According to Twycross, in medieval drama 'the audience are invited into a kind of complicity with the players, in which they behave as if they were taking the illusion for reality, while at the same time reserving the right to remember that it is only an illusion.'[47]

'It is the special property of theatre that everything onstage is a sign.'[48] Beckwith points out that a real chair used as a chair in a realistic theatrical setting is still a sign, and frequently in theatre there is a similarity between the sign and the thing signified, a basic form of signification known as ostension: 'Theatre's polysemy, its complexity and power, resides in its consistent, reflexive and systematic confusion of these two orders of representation, the illusional and the actual.'[49] When the actor, a representative of mankind, stands in for Jesus-standing-in-for-mankind, the sign of the performance is made more real to us the audience, first by the ostension of a man standing in for a man, and secondly by the precariousness of the substitution. Todd Johnson has drawn attention to Shannon Craigo-Snell's related argument that it is the provisionality of the rehearsal process rather than performance which is a paradigm of Christian recognition. 'It is in the doing of the text that one comes to know, not in the knowing of the text that one comes to do.'[50] At the centre of both Beckwith's and Craigo-Snell's understanding of the sacramentality of drama is its precariousness, the qualities brought to it by the fallible human actor whose actions enable the sacramental presence rather than create the divinisation of a material object. The idea that sacraments effect or cause what they signify is central: in the words of Aquinas, '*significando causant*'. Beckwith's concept of 'standing in' goes a long way to meet the objection that mimesis involves illusion and is therefore somehow false. It

[45] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 65.
[46] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 64.
[47] Meg Twycross, "Playing 'The Resurrection'," in *Medieval Studies for J. A. W. Bennett*, ed. P. L. Heyworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 276.
[48] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 62.
[49] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 63.
[50] Johnson and Savidge, *Performing the Sacred*, 55.

remains ultimately the case, however, that in a dramatic performance the actor is involved in imaging another person, and that time-limited imaging is not a characteristic of the kind of standing in or signing by Christ that Beckwith is talking about. She effectively acknowledges the objection by concluding that contemporary mystery play revivals do not have the same sacramental presence as their medieval originals, bound up as they are with the illusions of the heritage industry.

The baptism at the conclusion of *The Emperor Constantine* can therefore be seen as an 'ostension', something more than a symbol because the action is identical with what it symbolises. It is not a real baptism because it is performed by actors but because of it the play comes nearer than any other drama by Sayers to the principle initiated by Masefield's *The Coming of Christ* that at the end of a religious play the audience should become a congregation. The audience is not wholly a congregation, however, because the sacrament is not in fact being consecrated, and their status may be illuminated by a comparison from Dante. Steeped as she was at this date in the *Divine Comedy*, Sayers must have been aware that the figure of Dante is an ambivalent one as he journeys through Purgatory. He learns from the experience but unlike the characters he is watching he is not subject to judgment. He shares the spectacle without being fully part of it, blurring the boundaries between actor and audience as community drama has done since medieval times. Looking at the medieval origins of western drama in the tenth century liturgical trope of the "Quem quaeritis?", a brief dramatisation of the Marys' encounter with the angel at the tomb, we may note that in the earliest versions the dialogue appears as part of the introit of Easter and is typically followed by a liturgical expression of rejoicing in which a chorus or choir may join.[51] Drama was closely linked with liturgy from the outset.

Sayers's own approach to the mimetic emphasised the independence of a sign from its referent, and as we have seen this is in part an acknowledgment of the analogical relation between divine and human creativity. We saw in Chapter Three that in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" she addresses Plato's objection that all mimetic art involves deception and is thus morally suspect by arguing that the idea of art as creation is 'the one important contribution that Christianity has made to aesthetics'.[52]

---

[51] Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, Volume 1 of 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 201-9.

[52] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" in *Unpopular Opinions* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1946), 37.

Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* 'is *not* a representation of the actual event at all [...] it is something happening in the mind of Aeschylus, and it had never happened before.'[53] In an echo of Maritain that also anticipates David Jones, and covering some of the same ground as *The Mind of the Maker*, she suggests that the word 'image' may be substituted for words such as 'copy', 'imitation' and 'representation' and that 'what the artist is doing is *to image forth* something or other [...] Something which, by being an image, *expresses* that which it images.'[54] Theologically speaking, the Son is the image of the Father and they are also mysteriously one. The poem is not the expression of the poet's experience: 'the poem *is* the experience,' and the act of creating the poem reveals the poet's experience to himself.[55] William Temple made a similar point in *Mens Creatrix*: 'If the poet already knew exactly what he meant to say, why should he write the poem? [...] For only its completion can reveal, even to him, exactly what he wanted.'[56]

It would be possible to pursue this argument into the craft of the actor. That Derek Jacobi created something essentially new in the role of Lear in 2010 was generally agreed, and if proof of the principle were required we need only note the fact that tickets to see Jonathan Pryce in the same role a year later were selling equally fast. Newness is a more problematic concept when Michael Sheen creates the role of Tony Blair or David Frost or Brian Clough, or when Helen Mirren plays the present Queen (all in screenplays written by Peter Morgan), but the essential newness of these roles can be maintained by pointing out the obvious fact that the role is in the end separate from its referent. Interviewed for *The Times Magazine* Sheen was reported as saying that 'everybody has a blind spot, and that it's his job to search for that blind spot – "how they betray themselves".'[57] He creates a character around a perceived unifying vulnerability, which is an interpretation rather than imitation of the person on whom the role is based. As we saw in Chapter Two, 'Every scholar and critic who has written about *Hamlet,* every great actor who has ever played the part, every painter or musician who has found a source of power in *Hamlet*, retransmits that power to the spectator.'[58]

---

[53] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 36.
[54] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[55] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 38.
[56] William Temple, *Mens Creatrix* (London: Macmillan, 1917), 109.
[57] William Leith, "The Real Michael Sheen," *The Times Magazine* (October 22, 2011): 41.
[58] Sayers, *Mind*, 93.

For Sayers, any work done with integrity is 'itself a sacrament and manifestation of man's creative energy',[59] and every new work of art has a potentiality for sacramental participation. The sacramentality of *The Emperor Constantine* therefore resides first in its power as a created work of art to communicate with the spectator or audience, a createdness that depends not only on the writer but also the director, all the backstage people including the property makers, of whom Sayers herself was one, and the actors. The sacramental potentiality of the whole dramatic enterprise is the context for the enactment of a sacramental event at the end of the play. This sacramental enactment has three functions: first, completing the historical narrative in which this episode is a given; secondly, providing a climax for the spiritual narrative in which Constantine moves from outward forms to inward conviction; and thirdly, making the audience part of an enactment which is not the sacrament itself but which operates in a comparable way and in which drama and theology are reciprocally paradigmatic.

The invitation to the audience to experience the play sacramentally works in several ways. The first is with reference to King's identification of the processional mode in medieval drama as crossing the boundary between the mimetic and anagogic modes, where the 'responsive participant' experiences the transformative power identified by Beckwith in terms of 'presence' (Chapter One). Within the narrative of the play, the audience appropriates Constantine's gradual realisation that while salvation is mediated by a community of believers, the final step of surrender, also exemplified by the Airman in *The Just Vengeance*, is something that happens through the exercise of free will by an individual. Secondly, baptism in the early church took place on Easter Eve and was closely associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus so that the catechumens were accompanying Jesus symbolically on the journey of his Passion. It could thus be argued that the actor playing Constantine is playing a man who himself chooses symbolically to re-enact Jesus's journey from death to life, as in the semiotic 'standing in' process described by Beckwith above and also as in Harries's argument that the believer's journey with Christ during Holy Week is a paradigm for drama generally (Chapter One). As responsive participants the audience members witness that journey and may feel themselves to be part of it. Thirdly, at a real baptism the whole congregation is invited to renew baptismal vows so baptism is already a context in which the audience is expecting to be drawn in to the action

[59] Sayers, *Mind*, 178.

spiritually. The centrality of the scriptural sacrament of baptism in the early church can be seen in the lavish decoration of early baptisteries such as the one at Ravenna.

To those who argue that the concept of sacramental presence within a fictional re-enactment is problematic, therefore, it could be replied that the actor is in any case involved in sacramental activity by virtue of his or her involvement in the creative interpretation of the role, participating in God's creation and drawing on the Trinitarian sacramentality of *Mind*. The 'responsive participant' in *The Emperor Constantine* picks up the clues to Constantine's guilt in the same way as the audience did in *Zeal*, but a major difference in the later play is that the audience is invited to be part of the final baptismal scene, making the drama real by their presence and thus actualising the mutually paradigmatic character of drama and sacrament. In *The Emperor Constantine* the concluding sacramental enactment reinforces the sacramentality of the whole play as a complex creative act by providing a paradigm of how a sacrament works. The point of the baptism is not a fictive sacrament with blasphemous overtones, but apart from showing in narrative terms how Constantine's faith is completed by a personal commitment, for the audience it is a way of demonstrating a sacramental approach to the dramatic experience and all creativity. Using a baptismal paradigm in which participants experience a transformation that returns them to the mediating community as fully participating members, the drama enables an experience of creativity in the actors and audience whose effects remain with them as individuals and enrich the community. The ritual-within-a-play frames the process of sacramental participation in such a way that, in the words of Beckwith, 'theatre and sacrament become profound investigations of each other's opportunities and limits.'[60]

Empire and Conversion

Constantine's early commitment to Christianity is pragmatic and public, prompted initially by the apparent efficacy of the Chi-Rho as a talisman traditionally revealed to him in a dream before the battle of the Milvian Bridge. His commitment to unity at Nicaea is an extension both of a soldier's commitment to army discipline and of an emperor's commitment to control. In the following years, however, he experiences a traumatic challenge to his public and private integrity, and this is what constitutes the plot of *The Emperor Constantine*. Constantine's rise to power included divorcing his

[60] Beckwith, *Signifying*, 8.

first wife to make way for a dynastic marriage to a younger woman, Fausta. In the years 325/6 he executed his son Crispus by his first wife and, a few months later, his wife Fausta, both for unspecified acts of treason. Sayers takes up an unsubstantiated contemporary suggestion that they had an affair and gives it her own twist. Fausta is a proud girl who is in love with Constantine, resents the little attention he pays to her and finds her love turning to hate. She was the sister of Maxentius whom Constantine defeated at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and the head of Maxentius displayed after the battle was one of the properties used in the play. Pale and twisted, it is a visually powerful prompt, symbolising and tacitly explaining Fausta's hatred of Constantine. With the connivance of her personal servant Bassiana Marcia, Fausta makes it appear that her step-son Crispus has sexually assaulted her. The expression 'make a Hippolytus of Crispus'[61] alerts Helena to the plot but she is too late to prevent Constantine's execution of his innocent son. This plot is linked with a bid for power by Licinius, Constantine's brother-in-law whom he conquered in battle and spared earlier in the play.

The Emperor Constantine shows the same deft plotting and nuanced political dialogue that Sayers developed in *The Man Born to be King*, where Pilate and Caiaphas each imagines that he is the controlling power in Judaea. The marriage with Fausta cemented the precarious political alliance of Constantine with Fausta's father, Maximian, and her brother Maxentius. When Maximian comes to negotiate with Constantine, both men play for status while preserving outward courtesy:

CONSTANTINE	[…] Galerius has already recognised me as Caesar –
MAXIMIAN	Reluctantly.
CONSTANTINE	Reluctantly, if you like. But he has. And seeing that he is now advancing in force upon Maxentius –
MAXIMIAN	You needn't worry about that. His troops will come over to us. And between you and me, my dear lad, if I were to set up my standard in Gaul –
CONSTANTINE	My troops would do the same? If you think that, why come to me? (39-40).

In response to the patronising 'my dear lad', Constantine makes it clear who has the upper hand. When he defeats Maxentius at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine goes in person to break the news of Maxentius's death to his wife, Livia.

[61] In Greek mythology, Hippolytus rejected the advances of his step-mother Phaedra, who took revenge by framing him for rape in the eyes of her husband Theseus.

The characters within the play and also the audience expect a tragic scene, and Sayers's stagecraft is at its most skilful when Livia confounds expectation by thanking Constantine for delivering her from a tyrant. 'He was evil through and through – cruel to his enemies, faithless to his friends, vicious in his life, brutal in his bed. The evil was in the blood. [...] Fausta, his sister, is your wife, I believe. Look to yourself' (63). The warning contributes to the psychological drama and also prepares the audience for Fausta's betrayal. Constantine exacts no retribution on Maxentius's followers, but gives orders that the tyrant's head should be displayed and that his soldiers should each receive ten gold pieces (65). He secures the loyalty of the troops, but the audience notes that his wife's loyalty may be a different matter.

This is a long play with a cast of almost a hundred and Sayers is at pains to clarify the extremely complicated historical situation while maintaining narrative momentum. The scene above exemplifies three techniques for keeping the audience's interest, all of which she had developed in *The Man Born*: dialogue in which status alternates between the participants; the surprise reversal; and the planting of clues that enable the audience to see what the protagonists do not, as with the narrative thread of Fausta's disaffection. All these are in line with a strategy of involving the audience hermeneutically, and in the play's second half this hermeneusis is extended to become liturgical participation.

It is the case that Crispus and Fausta were both executed shortly before Constantine's twentieth anniversary of accession but historically the two incidents were probably unconnected. Of this episode Sayers wrote, 'I invented my own explanation for the killing of Crispus and Fausta (which no historian does anything satisfactory about), so as at any rate to make sense of it, and to tie up Constantine's personal religious experience with the theology of Nicaea.'[62] Sayers makes the discovery of the plot the pivotal event which brings Constantine to the point of choosing to be baptised. For a time his god is simply the one whose symbol brings victory. When he realises he has executed an innocent person, an exchange with his mother Helena echoes themes of guilt, sin and redemption from earlier plays. Constantine says: 'You told me once that until I understood sin I should never understand God. Now I know sin – I am sin; and understand nothing at all' (181). Helena replies that the sin was not all Constantine's, but his point is that sin is universal and inescapable. 'Sin is more

[62] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 38.

terrible than you think. It is not lying and cruelty and murder – it is a corruption of life at the source. I and mine are so knit together in evil that no-one can tell where the guilt begins or ends' (181). Helena's response is that 'evil can never be undone, but only purged and redeemed,' echoing *The Devil to Pay* and *The Just Vengeance*. In a chillingly tragic and highly dramatic conclusion, Constantine tells Fausta that she must fulfil her duties as his consort at the Vicennalia before her execution, with her good behaviour as a guarantee of her children's safety after her death, and the superbly apparelled pair pass outside to the roars of the crowd. Fausta accepts her fate without protest as befits an adherent of Platonism. This is the purgation; Constantine's approach to redemption follows.

Constantine's baptismal commitment in the final scene is made within the community and liturgy of the Church, but he has been brought to it not only by the worshipping community but by personal conviction. His realisation of his own sin is a realisation of the indivisibility of guilt and innocence, of the *felix culpa* by which sin is necessary for salvation. Presented with false evidence of his son's betrayal, Constantine kills him in anger without waiting to hear Crispus's defence. This most destructive of acts finally brings him to a realisation that people do evil without intending to and that as emperor he is not immune from the human condition of dependence on God's mercy. Constantine simultaneously enacts the killing of an innocent person, accepting shared guilt with the family of humankind who killed Jesus, and at the same time suffers the anguish of his son's death as God did.

In realising that the suffering of the innocent is at the heart of redemption Constantine is in effect accepting the co-equality of the Son with the Father. The principle of *homoöusios* which was formulated at Nicaea is now played out in his own life, as Sayers pointed out when she said she was linking Constantine's personal conversion with Nicaea. Dramatically speaking, the mindlessly destructive killing of Crispus reverses the generosity of the relation of God the Father to his son Jesus in which the Father allows his son to die while it is the son who freely chooses the course that will lead to death. In the final scene, set twelve years later, Constantine confesses and receives baptism, and as Eusebius starts reading the words of the baptismal service the major characters of Constantine's life pass before him and the voices of the Church recite the Nicene creed. The external narrative of the play is also the internal narrative of Constantine's conversion, and as we have seen, the

enactment of the sacrament of baptism is a focus for the sacramental Presence which is arguably part of the fabric of the play as a community experience.

Conclusion

Unlike Brabazon and Downing, I do not find a contradiction in Sayers's admission that the creeds are the result of a process of revision, and I suggest Brabazon is mistaken in assuming this means that Sayers accepted that 'the Creeds are not in fact statements of ultimate and unalterable truths.'[63] Sayers's reformulation through drama of the creeds and gospels implies her tacit acceptance that immutable truths need to be expressed differently in different times and places, a view expressed explicitly in the discussion of Atonement imagery (p. 170), but revision of the way truths are expressed did not, for Sayers, imply revision of the content of those truths. We have seen that Sayers herself described her explication of theology as 'the translation of ancient and hallowed formulae into modern speech and contemporary action',[64] and she vigorously repudiated any suggestion that her theology was anything but orthodox. It could be argued that Sayers's discussion of Atonement imagery implies that she believed in the power of metaphor to add new and legitimate theological meaning. If this is true, Sayers justified it to her own satisfaction in her claim that artistic and theological truth can critique each other.

In the last scene Constantine says of Athanasius, 'I came to dread the sight of him. He reminded me too much that the blood I had shed was God's blood. But I now accept that most terrible truth as the sole hope of salvation' (188). Like the Airman in *The Just Vengeance*, Constantine acknowledges a solidarity in guilt. His conversion is both intellectual and emotional, the point where passion enters the logical framework, reminding us that Sayers's own point of contact with the divine was the 'passionate intellect'. We have seen that several times in her life Sayers remarked 'I do not know whether I believe in Christ or whether I am only in love with the pattern.'[65] She admired Christian theology because it was a logically coherent system, but in her festival plays there is always a point of entry into or exit from the pattern. The logic of *Zeal*,[66] where the arrogance of the architect William of Sens leads directly to his fall from the scaffolding, is balanced by the fact that this forces

[63] Downing, *Stages*, 133, quoting Brabazon, *Sayers*, 265 and referencing Sayers, *Letters Four*, 140, 166.
[64] Sayers, "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists," 111.
[65] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 138.
[66] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 22, note.

him to acknowledge his community in human guilt and dependence on God's grace, moving out of the prison of law into the freedom of love. In *The Devil to Pay* Mephistopheles represents the potentiality for evil which Faustus activates by means of his will, as described in Chapter VII of *The Mind of the Maker*, but again in the final scene Faustus faces a personal judgment and makes a costly choice. The endings of these plays can be linked with Sayers's emphasis on the existential impossibility of salvation without the right belief that involves an element of conversion in the sense of turning round or confrontation with the past. That confrontation is made visible throughout *The Just Vengeance* where the Airman, a pilot trained to be completely self-reliant, meets a pageant of historical figures from the community of his birth, and finally accepts that his individuality only has meaning within a community of both guilt and salvation. In *The Emperor Constantine*, the symbolic unity implied by the acceptance of the term *homoöusios* can be seen as applying to the relations of the Church and the world at two very specific historic moments, the empire of Constantine and Sayers's hopes for the civilisation emerging from World War II. In terms of Sayers's belief that 'the dogma is the drama,' we might argue that the term *homoöusios*, asserting the same ground of being for different entities, becomes a metaphor for the play's vision of the church and the world.

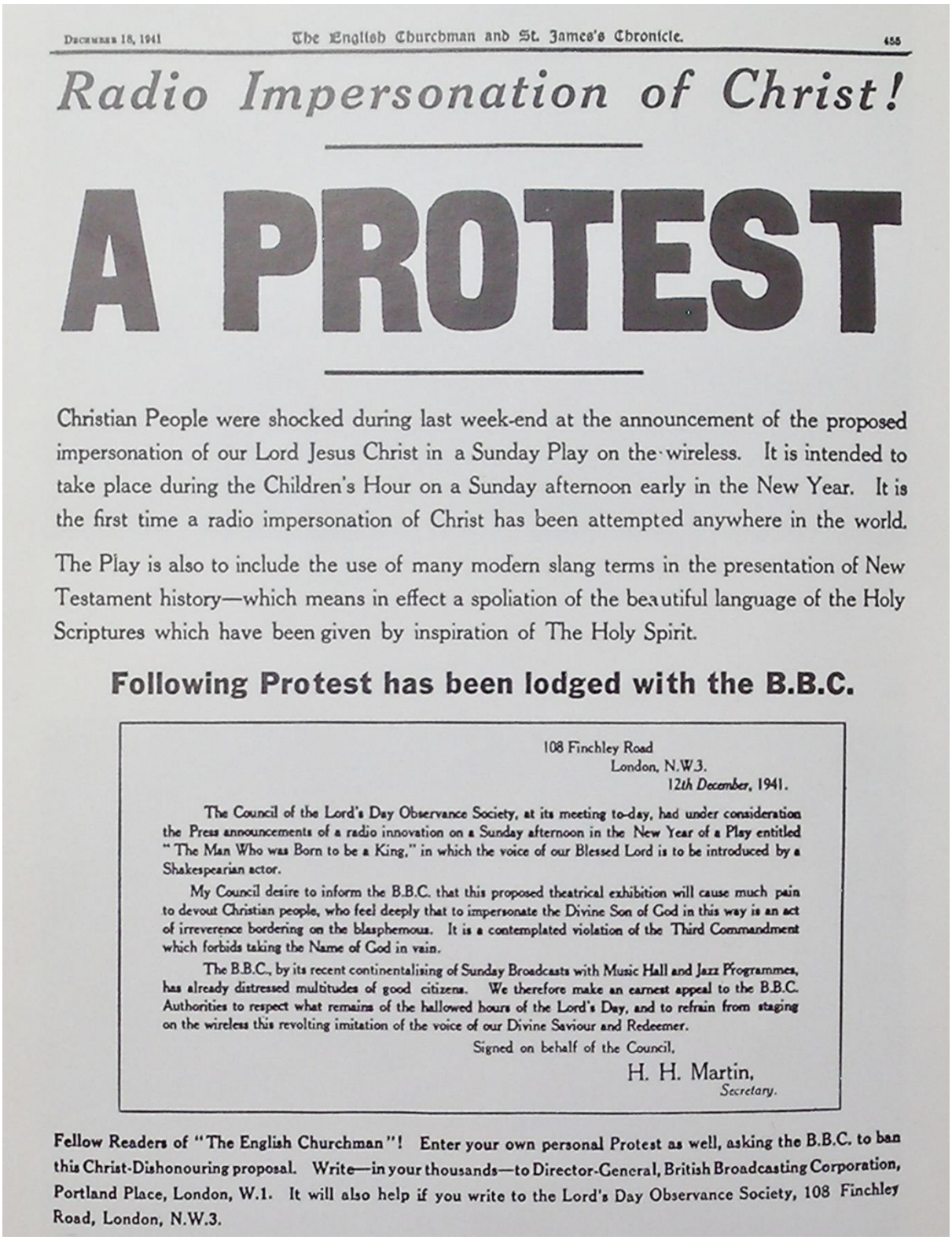
Chapter Seven
The Man Born to be King

Introduction

Sayers's twelve-part BBC radio life of Christ *The Man Born to be King* was broadcast between December 1941 and October 1942, and with two million adult listeners its reach was greater than anything else Sayers did. As a radio play, however, it raises some different issues from the staged plays and for this reason I have chosen to discuss it out of chronological sequence. In examining the festival plays from *The Zeal of Thy House* to *The Emperor Constantine* I have developed an argument that each play strengthens Sayers's drive to show her audiences that theology is a process in which they can be involved. I have suggested that drama can be understood in terms of a sacramental paradigm in which participation enacts change in the audience through the process they themselves have mediated. In *The Man Born*, however, the radio audience can not be said to activate a sacrament dependent on the dynamic between actors and physically present spectator-participants. Instead, although the sacramental process associated with the listeners' creative use of the imagination is at work even more intensively, in *The Man Born* there is also a different kind of participative involvement that takes the form of being part of the body of believers who will take the story forward into the future. The narrative initiates a hermeneutical imperative which directs the listeners to acts of interpretation that will continue beyond the plays' ending, and the basis for this in theological aesthetics is to be found both in Maritain's formulation of the artistic process as continuing God's creation and in Sayers's own Trinitarian model of creativity.

Commenting on the series in his history of the Churches' relationship with the BBC, Kenneth M. Wolfe suggests that *The Man Born to be King* resolved the traditional conflict between popular religion and theological seriousness: 'While immensely popular, as the enormous correspondence indicated, it nevertheless contributed to a profoundly significant shift in the popular understanding of the gospels.'[1] The realism Sayers adopted as the plays' dominant mode made controversy inevitable not

[1] Kenneth M. Wolfe, *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956: the Politics of Broadcast Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1984), 532.



December 18, 1941 The English Churchman and St. James's Chronicle. 455

Radio Impersonation of Christ!

A PROTEST

Christian People were shocked during last week-end at the announcement of the proposed impersonation of our Lord Jesus Christ in a Sunday Play on the wireless. It is intended to take place during the Children's Hour on a Sunday afternoon early in the New Year. It is the first time a radio impersonation of Christ has been attempted anywhere in the world.

The Play is also to include the use of many modern slang terms in the presentation of New Testament history—which means in effect a spoliation of the beautiful language of the Holy Scriptures which have been given by inspiration of The Holy Spirit.

Following Protest has been lodged with the B.B.C.

108 Finchley Road
London, N.W.3.
12th December, 1941.

The Council of the Lord's Day Observance Society, at its meeting to-day, had under consideration the Press announcements of a radio innovation on a Sunday afternoon in the New Year of a Play entitled "The Man Who was Born to be a King," in which the voice of our Blessed Lord is to be introduced by a Shakespearian actor.

My Council desire to inform the B.B.C. that this proposed theatrical exhibition will cause much pain to devout Christian people, who feel deeply that to impersonate the Divine Son of God in this way is an act of irreverence bordering on the blasphemous. It is a contemplated violation of the Third Commandment which forbids taking the Name of God in vain.

The B.B.C., by its recent continentalising of Sunday Broadcasts with Music Hall and Jazz Programmes, has already distressed multitudes of good citizens. We therefore make an earnest appeal to the B.B.C. Authorities to respect what remains of the hallowed hours of the Lord's Day, and to refrain from staging on the wireless this revolting imitation of the voice of our Divine Saviour and Redeemer.

Signed on behalf of the Council,
H. H. Martin,
Secretary.

Fellow Readers of "The English Churchman"! Enter your own personal Protest as well, asking the B.B.C. to ban this Christ-Dishonouring proposal. Write—in your thousands—to Director-General, British Broadcasting Corporation, Portland Place, London, W.1. It will also help if you write to the Lord's Day Observance Society, 108 Finchley Road, London, N.W.3.

Fig. 15. Objection to *The Man Born to be King*.

only because of legal restrictions on the representation of Jesus but also because there were widespread public reservations about the appropriateness of a human actor's playing the role of God incarnate (Fig. 15, p. 209). A second line of opposition came from those, both Catholics and Protestants, for whom it was unacceptable that an author should invent dialogue, particularly of a colloquial kind, in dramatising the gospels. In 1924, as playwrights turned to religious subjects with a questioning spirit prompted by the War, the Lord Chamberlain had reassured the Archbishop of Canterbury that where the voice of God is heard, 'writers would not be permitted "to manufacture phraseology for Him".'[2] Sayers was prepared both emotionally and theologically for opposition and she increasingly had the support of the BBC's Central Religious Advisory Committee. It is arguable that opposition to the broadcasts increased their influence; Sayers certainly believed this.[3]

Although it was forbidden to present the persons of the Trinity in the public performance of any play dating from after 1843, what was forbidden on the commercial stage was possible on the radio provided there was no studio audience, and churches were also considered exempt from the Lord Chamberlain's jurisdiction (p. 144-5 above). In practice, however, church people were wary of any presentation of the person of Jesus, and Sayers herself defended the general principle of censorship: '[...] many plays which would be wholly without offence in the reverent and decent hands of Messrs. A-- or Mr. B-- have to be withheld from the public for fear of what they might only too easily become under the sensational management of Mr. X--' (17, note 1). Nevertheless, when Sayers was invited to write a radio life of Christ, her first stipulation was that Jesus should be a character in the drama. She wrote to Welch that 'the device of indicating Christ's presence by a "voice off", or by a shaft of light, or a shadow, or what not, tends to suggest to people that He never was a real person at all.'[4] The same approach is apparent in the play's Introduction where she writes that the material 'should be handled, not liturgically or symbolically, but realistically and historically: "this is a thing that actually happened"'(17).

---

[2] Steve Nicholson, *The Censorship of British Drama*, vol. 1 (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003), 192.

[3] Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction, *The Man Born to be King* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1943), 40. Subsequent references to the Introduction, notes and plays in this volume will be given in the text.

[4] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 146-7. In 1930 the Lord Chamberlain's office recommended precisely these devices for suggesting the person of Christ in a new version of the Chester Mysteries. Nicholson, *Censorship* 1, 195.

Sayers was driven by the need to communicate the gospels without preaching. As she made clear in her Introduction:

> [I]n writing a play on this particular subject, the dramatist must begin by ridding himself of all edificatory and theological intentions. He must set out, not to instruct but to show forth; not to point a moral but to tell a story [...] It was assumed by many pious persons who approved the project that my object in writing *The Man Born to be King* was 'to do good' […] But that was in fact not my object at all, though it was quite properly the object of those who commissioned the plays in the first place. My object was [...] to make as good a work of art as I could [...] the theology – the dogma – must be taken by the writer as part of the material with which he works, and not as an exterior end to which his work is directed. Dogma is the vocabulary and grammar of his art (20).

Sayers's job was to give people the Bible and the creeds in language they could understand and to leave them to continue on an intellectual and spiritual journey beyond the ending of the play if they chose to do so. An important component of the enterprise was 'translating' theological ideas into terms people could understand. Among the 'five things […] that my sort can safely do' listed in Sayers's 1954 letter to John Wren-Lewis (discussed in Chapter Eight) is 'help to disentangle the language-trouble by translating from one jargon to another.'[5] The plays' hermeneutical prompting will only take root if the content is in language the audience understands.

> Tear off the disguise of the Jacobean idiom, go back to the homely and vigorous Greek of Mark or John, translate it into its current English counterpart, and there every man may see his own face. We played the parts in that tragedy, nineteen and a half centuries since, and are perhaps playing them to-day, in the same good faith and in the same ironic ignorance. But to-day we cannot see the irony, for we the audience are now the actors and do not know the end of the play. But it may assist us to know what we are doing if the original drama is shown to us again, with ourselves in the original parts (23).

The language of Sayers's drama is not only modern dialogue but the diachronic realism identified by Rowan Williams as enabling audience appropriation, and Sayers's emphasis on the audience's independent response is in line with her

[5] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 142.

acceptance of Maritain's principle that the artist continues God's creation rather than copying it. This is particularly the case with a radio play where the audience has to collaborate by creating a mental image of the scene being heard.

Sayers could have chosen to justify her approach to the material by using a theology of creation in which the artist remakes and renews God's world. It was, however, more with reference to the artistic process itself that Sayers justified her imaginative handling of the gospels in the Introduction to the published plays. If an artist serves the work with integrity the meaning will emerge from the material. We have seen that in *Zeal* Sayers explored Maritain's view that the cathedral builders 'revealed God's truth, but without *doing it on purpose*, and because it was not done on purpose.'[6] For Sayers, 'It is the business of the dramatist not to subordinate the drama to the theology, but to approach the job of truth-telling from his own end, and trust the theology to emerge undistorted from the dramatic presentation of the story' (20). For instance, a Christ who predestined Judas to damnation would not be consistent with the Christ who emerges from his other recorded words and actions.

Sayers's commitment to realism for this project was not only in order to encourage audience engagement but also to counteract stained-glass Docetism. A third and equally important purpose was to make clear the historical materiality of the Incarnation on which her sacramental theology, like Temple's, was based. As Sayers said in her wartime talk "The Sacrament of Matter", '[The Church's] sacraments are her way of maintaining before the world that central meaning of the Incarnation – the intimate and unbreakable union of spirit with mind and matter.'[7] *The Man Born* unites two of her most important convictions: that God lived and died in the material world, and secondly that this is the necessary condition for a sacramental theology that finds meaning in the relation of God to the material world. There is an important implication here for Sayers's dramatic practice. A belief that the Bible is to be read sacramentally, that is to say, looking for the spiritual truth within a narrative, means that it becomes less important to ask questions concerning the literal historicity of the Gospels. Paradoxically, Sayers's sacramentalism allows her to present at face value miracles such as the raising of Lazarus which with a different approach could be subject to reductionist readings. The Lazarus episode becomes a symbol of the

[6] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 52.
[7] Sayers, *Christ of the Creeds*, 38.

conflict between the will to life and the will to death that characterises the struggle between Jesus and Judas.

Both Sayers and Temple took for granted a method of exegesis in which the literal coexists with the symbolic and anagogic, and Sayers cited Temple as a theological source for *The Man Born*. In his *Readings in St John's Gospel* Temple had emphasised that the gospel narrative is unavoidably filtered through the mind not only of the gospeller but also of the contemporary exegete: 'What reaches us is never a certified record but always a personal impression. Thus our concern is always with the Christ of faith, not with some supposed different Jesus of history.'[8] His praise for Browning's poem "A Death in the Desert", as being 'the most penetrating interpretation of St John that exists in the English language',[9] provides explicit support for an imaginative expansion of the gospel. James Welch, the BBC's Director of Religious Broadcasting, in a *Radio Times* article a few days before the first broadcast, made a virtue of Sayers's imaginative licence by comparing her task with that of the gospellers: 'Miss Sayers is simply repeating the work of the Gospel writers themselves. Their work was to paint a picture, to give us only a glimpse of Jesus of Nazareth […] The Gospels, therefore, are a portrait in miniature. Miss Sayers's plays provide the same […] All the dialogue is in modern speech. This must mean […] paraphrasing some of the sayings of Our Lord, omitting many, and even inventing some words that are not attributed to him in the Gospel records.'[10] Welch's assertive defence of the project sprang from his conviction that 'Christianity is concerned with patterns of the truth and cannot be silent about them.'[11]

Sayers not only invented dialogue but created an overarching structure linking the plays. This was particularly important in the central plays where the gospel narratives concerning Jesus's ministry do not supply a strong chronological sequence. Soon after receiving the commission Sayers wrote to James Welch that 'If we can get a coherent Judas we can probably get a coherent plot.'[12] Like Leonardo da Vinci, who

[8] Temple, *Readings in St John's Gospel (First and Second Series)* (London: Macmillan, 1950), xvi. The two parts were published separately in 1939 and 1940.
[9] Temple, *Readings*, xvii.
[10] James Welch, "The Man Born to be King," *Radio Times* (December 19, 1941): 5.
[11] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 203.
[12] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 173.

left Judas and Jesus until last when he was painting "The Last Supper" in Milan,[13] Sayers thought that the balance between these two characters would define the structure of the story: Judas's challenge to the kingship of Jesus, the will to death against the will to life, would speak to a nation fighting Hitler. There is one major fictional character, Baruch the Zealot, whose revolutionary agenda in an occupied country enables Sayers to make Judas suspect that Jesus is sympathetic to the Zealots. In Sayers's time Judas was commonly assumed to be a disappointed revolutionary, and she gives the story a twist by reversing that: Judas betrays Jesus because he believes Jesus is preaching peace and at the same time hypocritically planning a military coup. This invented plot line drives the story forward from Jesus's ministry to the given ending of the trials, crucifixion and resurrection.

Anthony Cane has summarised the debates about Judas's motivation and fate from Patristic times to the present, showing that interpretations of Judas both reflect and influence Christology:[14] while Augustine suggested Judas's calling as a disciple must have been on a different basis to the other disciples, Origen argued that he changed during the ministry, and while Dante damned him irretrievably, Aquinas believed that Jesus could not theologically have withheld the salvific body and blood at the Last Supper. In the twentieth century Barth regarded Judas's ultimate redemption as an 'open question' while Balthasar saw all hell as being within Christ's salvific scope. What the theologians of widely separated periods agree on is the importance of Judas for Christology.[15] Sayers's Christology is determined by her interpretation of Judas: 'to choose an obvious crook for the purpose of letting him damn himself would be the act of a devil'(31), and the full manhood of Sayers's Christ means that for most of the story Jesus believes Judas might not betray him.

Sayers sets Judas and Jesus against each other in such a way that their challenges to each other become a theological commentary. In making the other disciples witnesses of their struggle she adds a channel of involvement for her radio audience, who identify their own uncertainties in the disciples' incomprehension and are thus drawn in to the exegetical debate about what the Bible means. The dialectic between Jesus and Judas illuminates the question, both for the characters within the drama

[13] This is according to the picture legends in the National Gallery of London's exhibition "Leonardo da Vinci: Painter at the Court of Milan" (9 November 2011 – 5 February 2012).
[14] Anthony Cane, *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).
[15] Cane, "Judas' Participation in the Footwashing and Last Supper," in *Judas Iscariot*, 89-111.

and for the audience outside it, of how the words of Jesus are to be interpreted, or, as Welch put it in the *Radio Times*, 'the rekindling of our imaginations with a sense of what it meant for the divine to dwell in human flesh'.[16] This dialectic also enables Sayers to make a wider theological point about salvation, that every individual has the power of choice. Judas's choices are presented by Jesus himself and even as he goes to hang himself Judas admits that Jesus would forgive him, emphatically making the point that he chooses his own damnation. 'He has the greatest possibilities of them all for good, and therefore for evil' (69), and like Faustus in *The Devil to Pay* he chooses to deceive himself, losing the 'good of the intellect' by making evil his good. For Sayers, who saw society as being increasingly in the grip of a secular determinism associated with the rise of the social sciences, the doctrine of free will was central to Christianity and she makes it central to this play which more than all the others mediated Christian doctrine to the general public. Angered as she was by the international appeasement of Hitler in the thirties, she regarded free will as particularly important in times of totalitarian threat.

The Genesis of *The Man Born to be King*

As Sayers gained confidence as a playwright she became convinced that she had a distinctive style and something new to contribute in her characteristic fusion of theology and theatre.[17] Her friendship with Charles Williams may have been the pivotal factor in directing her towards biblical drama, but we have seen that the style she adopted was consciously different from Williams's. Contemporary verse dramas using biblical material, such as Williams's *Seed of Adam* and Auden's *Christmas Oratorio: For the Time Being*,[18] were weighted with symbolism and mythology; by contrast, Sayers saw her way forward in terms of realism. In May 1938 she was writing a play about Herod the Great and asking a correspondent for recommended reading.[19] This play was never finished but by October, at the invitation of Frederic Iremonger, she sent the first draft of a radio Nativity play, *He That Should Come*, to the BBC producer Val Gielgud, who later directed *The Man Born to be King*. *He That Should Come* was broadcast on Christmas Day 1938, and the first play of *The*

[16] Welch, *Radio Times*.
[17] Catherine Kenney has noted that 'As early as 1931, she had been approached by the BBC to do broadcasts on religious topics' and had declined. Kenney, *Remarkable Case*, 220, and note 4, 290.
[18] W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, revised edition 2007), 347-400.
[19] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 80.

Man Born, also on the subject of the Nativity, was broadcast on 21 December, 1941. In the intervening three years Sayers had a well-documented row with the BBC about the respective roles of author and editor, which has been retold in detail in a number of studies.[20]

Following the success of *He That Should Come* Sayers was invited to write a sequence of twelve plays on the life of Christ for BBC Children's Hour, produced in the Bristol studio under the leadership of Derek McCulloch, "Uncle Mac" as he was known to millions of listeners. The initiative was part of wider national effort in which the Religious Broadcasting Department (RBD) was trying to move outside the narrow confines of what had previously been regarded as religious, often in the face of doubts or opposition from the Central Religious Advisory Committee (CRAC). When James Welch became Director of Religious Broadcasting in 1939 he faced a series of challenges resulting from disagreements about the form wartime broadcasting should take,[21] and his diplomacy in these controversies led to the measure of respect that underlies the parliamentary support he was given in the crisis which arose regarding *The Man Born to be King*. Welch's predecessor Frederic Iremonger had wanted 'live religious drama without controversy or hurt to sensitive religious feelings',[22] and Welch was clearly more in tune with Sayers's way of thinking, but initially he was not able to provide her first choice of director, as Val Gielgud, director of *He That Should Come*, was not involved with the Children's Department.

When the first draft of "Kings in Judaea" was submitted, McCulloch's assistant May Jenkin wrote asking Sayers if the department could edit where the text was considered too obscure for the Children's Hour audience. Sayers objected strongly to this, claiming that as a professional writer, and former child, she herself knew what children might respond to. A number of angry exchanges ensued with Sayers finally withdrawing from the project unless Gielgud took it on. Welch eventually secured Gielgud and was assured of Sayers's co-operation. In his authorized biography James Brabazon does not mince words:

---

[20] Notably in Wolfe, Brabazon and Coomes.

[21] A debate which meandered on throughout the war was the question of whether conscientious objectors should be allowed to broadcast even on topics remote from the justification of armed conflict. (Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 170-91.)

[22] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 214.

> Let it be said now, by someone who has been a professional in the theatrical business for almost thirty years [...] that in this matter, whatever the outcome, it was the staff of the BBC who behaved like professionals, and Dorothy [he knew Sayers personally] who behaved like a spoilt and hysterical amateur.[23]

In an earlier chapter, discussing Sayers's attitude towards attempts made to film the Wimsey stories, Brabazon quotes a letter in which Sayers complains about a film director who had promised control over dialogue and characterisation, and then reneged.[24] Although Brabazon does not connect the two incidents, it seems likely that this earlier experience may have fed into Sayers's uncompromising reaction to Jenkins.

The CRAC supported the project, reassured by Sayers's compendious reading and the fact that she added New Testament Greek to her knowledge of Classical Greek in order to be able to translate the Bible from the original. Things now progressed smoothly until Sayers gave a press conference at Welch's request shortly before the first broadcast. To illustrate the fact that the plays were written in contemporary English she read a debate on the Christian attitude towards money from Play Four, "The Heirs to the Kingdom", in which the Cockney disciple Matthew tells one of his colleagues who has been cheated on the market that he has been 'had for a sucker' (117). Brabazon reports that the *Daily Mail* headline of the following day, 11 December, 1941, was "BBC 'Life of Christ' Play in US Slang".[25] The transatlantic objection was short-lived, coming as it did a matter of days before America entered the war, but the use of colloquial speech continued to be a contentious issue and Welch was embroiled in further rounds of diplomacy.[26] Although the ecclesiastical hierarchy was involved and a question asked in parliament, it is clear that the final balance of opinion was overwhelmingly on the side of the plays' supporters. Welch maintained a sense of humour and wrote in his Foreword: 'Others said that Singapore fell because these plays were broadcast [...] they were answered by the supporter who thanked us for the plays which (ending in October) "made possible the November victories in Libya and Russia"!'[27] The Foreword also makes it clear that Welch supported Sayers in her insistence that the plays should speak for themselves

---

[23] James Brabazon, *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1988), 200.
[24] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 155.
[25] Brabazon, *Sayers*, 203.
[26] James Welch, Foreword to *The Man Born to be King*, 9-11.
[27] Welch, *Man Born*, 15.

and not preach: '[...] the task of the Church in any age is to *reveal* Christ. It cannot do more, and it should not attempt less.'[28] In the *Radio Times* article Welch had made a robust defence of Sayers's use of colloquial speech, saying 'It is partly this escape from the familiar language which helps us to see Christ as a real human being,'[29] and in her Introduction to *The Man Born* Sayers justified colloquialism on the grounds that 'the local speech must have been full of catch-phrases picked up from the foreign soldiers and merchants who swarmed along the great trade-routes of the empire' (24).

The Theological Power of Realism: *He That Should Come*

He That Should Come is a one-hour radio play set in the courtyard of the Bethlehem inn where a cross-section of Judaean humanity, most of it highly politicised, is being forced to rub shoulders for the purposes of a census. In style it combines hieratic and poetic language for the Three Kings with a rather formulaic realism in which the guests at the inn represent different cultural attitudes. Sayers had researched Herod's reign extensively and was undoubtedly aware that there is no corroborating evidence that people had to return to their birthplace for any Roman census, but here, in her first Bible dramatisation to be performed, she makes a decision which she sticks to throughout her career as an interpreter of the Christian gospel: she dramatises the story as written, without modifying incidents on which doubt has been cast by the conclusions of biblical criticism. We have seen that Temple's *Readings* emphasise the possibility of non-literal reception of the gospel stories, and in both *He That Should Come* and *The Man Born* Sayers's realism goes hand in hand with an acceptance of different modes of reading.

There are several reasons for Sayers's literal approach. First, *He That Should Come* was conceived as a teaching medium for children between seven and fourteen. Concern was felt in the churches, then as now, that children did not know the stories which underpin Christian culture, and the traditional narrative was therefore an essential component of the project. Secondly, dramatising the gospel stories as they stood absolved her from the need to adjudicate between competing theories about their origins and, centrally for her project in *The Man Born*, allowed her to examine the process of exegesis itself through the drama. A third reason for Sayers's

[28] Welch, *Man Born*, 12.
[29] Welch, *Radio Times*.

inclusiveness was that she found in the gospels the framework of an internally coherent system of theology, and to take away or rearrange bits and pieces was to destroy the logic. For Sayers, as for her contemporaries, the importance of pattern extended beyond the Christian story to a narrative of salvation which embraced earlier religions, influenced by the anthropological work of James Frazer and Jane Harrison. In her Easter article for *The Sunday Times* in 1939, published in pamphlet form as *Strong Meat*, Sayers praised Eliot's play *The Family Reunion* in which the Greek myth of Orestes is given a contemporary context and a Christian resolution is implied but not stated: 'The only way to deal with the past is to accept the *whole* past, and by accepting it, to change its meaning.'[30] *He That Should Come* begins and ends with the Wise Men who are presented in a different style from the dominant realism of the play. They embody a theme which is stronger in *He That Should Come* than in *The Man Born*, that of Christ as the fulfilment of pagan as well as Jewish prophecies.

In the first scene of *He That Should Come* Caspar describes the journey:

> This blinding silence of silver midnight,
> Brighter than moonlight, whiter than sunlight,
> This unaccustomed miracle of sevenfold starlight.[31]

Each of the Wise Men embodies an aspect of the Trinitarian pattern of mind, body and spirit, and in suggesting that Christianity can embrace and absorb other religions, though ultimately it will supersede them, Sayers was in line with many contemporary writers and artists, for instance Eliot in his 1930 poem "The Journey of the Magi":

> […] this Birth was
> Hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death.[32]

For Chesterton the presence of the Shepherds at the Nativity represents continuity with pagan mythology just as the Magi represent continuity with pagan philosophy. 'Had Plato and Pythagoras and Aristotle stood for an instant in the light that came out of that little cave, they would have known that their own light was not universal. It is far from certain, indeed, that they did not know it already.'[33] Sayers herself drew

[30] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Meat* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), 23.
[31] Sayers, *He That Should Come* in *Four Sacred Plays* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1948), 223.
[32] Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 103.
[33] Chesterton, *Everlasting Man*, 207.

together the universality and uniqueness of the Incarnation in the Introduction to *The Man Born*:

> There have been incarnate gods a-plenty, and slain-and-resurrected gods not a few; but He is the only God who has a date in history (20).
> […]
> God died – not in a legend, not in a symbol, not in a distant past nor in a realm unknown, but here, a few weeks ago – *you saw it happen*; the whole great cloudy castle of natural religion and poetic prophecy is brought down to earth and firmly cemented upon that angular and solid cornerstone (28).

The Wise Men offered a way into the story of Jesus for people who saw Christianity as a world faith among many, and Sayers understood this viewpoint but nevertheless was convinced that the materiality of the Incarnation sets Christianity apart. In *He That Should Come* Jesus's birth will unite and transcend all philosophies and Jesus as Messiah will offer salvation to non-Jews. The play's social cosmopolitanism is central because it makes a theological point about the universality of the Christian faith.

In the Introduction to *He That Should Come* Sayers objected to the ethereal images of Jesus which were current and wanted to show, in her own words, that 'He was born, not into "the Bible", but into the world', establishing an approach she continued in *The Man Born*.[34] To Iremonger, in 1938 Director of Religious Broadcasting, she wrote, 'I feel, myself, that it is of some importance to get people to realize that the Gospel story was enacted against an ordinary human and political background. This means, of course, that for the other characters concerned, the events appeared of very trifling importance, whatever they may seem to us now.'[35] Her perception is reminiscent of Auden's poem "Musée des Beaux Arts", published in 1938 and inspired by Brueghel's painting of Icarus disappearing into the sea in the corner of the picture while people go about their daily routines. Brueghel's subjects also included the Massacre of the Innocents and the Census at Bethlehem. *He That Should Come* is rather like one of Brueghel's busy canvases, making everyday realism the frame for significant events.[36]

---

[34] Dorothy L. Sayers, Introduction to *He That Should Come*, *Four Sacred Plays*, 218.
[35] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 93.
[36] For a discussion of 'the commonplace as the vehicle of ultimacy' see Thomas Howard, "Mimesis and Incarnation," in Charles Huttar, ed., *Imagination and the Spirit: Essays in Literature and the Christian Faith Presented to Clyde S. Kilby* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 43-52.

In this discussion of *He That Should Come* we have seen that Sayers's use of realism encourages audience appropriation in terms of listener response and, theologically speaking, makes a point about the materiality of the Incarnation. These work together to activate an element of sacramentality in radio drama even though the audience is not physically present. The exercise of the imagination to create an unseen scenario is the work of the artist within every human, reflecting God in the generativity of the work and also in the creative process that mirrors or continues the divine. Sayers had discovered a source of theological power in the use of realism, and this was confirmed by the letters of appreciation she received. Barbara Reynolds comments:

> Letters like these gave Dorothy a new view of herself and of her role as a writer. She experienced an increase in confidence and a surge of creative power which enabled her to rise, when the moment came, to the greatest challenge of her professional life, the invitation to write a series of plays for radio on the life of Christ.[37]

Realism and Hermeneutics: Reading *The Man Born to be King* Dynamically

Sayers's insistence that an actor should voice the character of Jesus was an aspect of the realism that encourages the listeners of a radio play to exercise creative imagination in bringing a story to life. Sayers's director, Val Gielgud, specialised in the realistic sound effects which Kenneth Wolfe says 'could create "presence" in the very private world of each home and fireside.'[38] 'Presence' in this sense means the context in which characters are experienced as though present, and in exegetical terms it has a further function of inviting the listener both into the characters' attempts to 'read' each other and also into the author's reading of the biblical text. Because the overarching subject of *The Man Born* is exegesis, the business of interpreting Jesus's words and understanding his message, the function of the imaginative suspension of disbelief induced by realism is paradoxically also that of enabling the audience to engage critically with two texts, first with the Bible which the play mediates and secondly with the play itself. In Sayers's case this mitigates the criticism often levelled at realist texts that they may insidiously convey an ideology without appearing to do so, though Welch acknowledged that 'It is impossible to dramatise the life of Jesus without interpretation. But without interpretation it is

[37] Reynolds, *Life and Soul*, 290.
[38] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 215.

impossible to speak or even to write of him […] None of the dangers of the dramatic method is absent from preaching or writing, when the subject is the Son of God.'[39] The closure of a narrative as evidenced, for instance, in the detective story, is not replicated in *The Man Born* because Play Twelve makes the ending of the gospels a prelude to the story of Christianity which is just beginning. Sayers's realism is thus transformed into an open-ended enterprise in which the listener's unknown response is part of the conclusion.

Temple defines the work of imagination in relation to its source material by comparing a photograph and a portrait: 'The great portrait painter may give a representation of a man which no photographer can emulate. And he does it by drawing what is not at any moment altogether actual.'[40] This is not to say that Temple questions the story: in fact this is a way in which he can avoid questioning the story, so that a liberal approach to exegesis in fact reinforces a high level of acceptance of the texts as they stand. Sayers probably ascribed more literal historicity to the gospels than Temple did:

> Take, for example, the various accounts of the Resurrection appearances at the Sepulchre. The divergences appear very great on first sight; and much ink and acrimony have been expended on proving that certain of the stories are not 'original' or 'authentic', but are accretions grafted upon the first-hand reports by the pious imagination of Christians. Well, it may be so. But the fact remains that *all* of them, without exception, can be made to fall into place in a single orderly and coherent narrative without the smallest contradiction or difficulty, and without any suppression, invention or manipulation, beyond a trifling effort to *imagine* the natural behaviour of a bunch of startled people running about in the dawnlight between Jerusalem and the Garden (35).

Once again Sayers appeals to dramatic coherence as a test of theology. Sayers is no fundamentalist and accepts the possibility of the distortion of historical and factual truth. But she is always sceptical of liberalism, and here this is linked with her love of pattern which locates meaning in the actual coherence of theological structures. She accepts the possibility of inauthenticity but sidesteps it by appealing to the significance of pattern in the reciprocal critique of art and theology.

---

[39] Welch, *Radio Times*.
[40] Temple, *Readings*, xvi.

Stanley Fish in his book *Surprised by Sin*[41] developed a dialectical reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* which suggests that Satan's notorious attractiveness is deliberately placed to elicit the counteracting purpose of God and that the reader goes on an educative journey during the course of the poem.[42] I suggest that the same process is at work in *The Man Born* with Jesus and Judas. Unlike Milton's Satan, Sayers's Judas is not an attractive character. His dishonesty guarantees that the audience cannot like him, and the clues to his degradation are obliquely planted as part of the hermeneutical process. Like later reader-response theorists Sayers conceived of reading as a dynamic activity, as we saw in *The Mind of the Maker* where she comments on the way a familiar play such as *Hamlet* is experienced as a whole and 'the Energy is now related to the Idea more or less as it was in the mind of the playwright: the Word has returned to the Father.'[43] The response of the reader completes what the creator had begun. This dynamic model of reading can be compared with the theories of Wolfgang Iser in his influential work of 1976, *The Act of Reading*: 'A second reading of the text will never have the same effect as the first, for the simple reason that the originally assembled meaning is bound to influence the second reading.' [44] Meaning has a temporal character, but as '[the overall meaning] cannot be abstracted from the different phases of the process, its constitution and its apprehension in fact go hand in hand.' *The Man Born* can be thought of as dramatising the listening process itself, as the listeners engage with the hermeneutical process of constant revision and reinterpretation that is characteristic of the relationship of the two protagonists.

The impact of a play is also determined by its performers and production team, and in prefacing the published plays with her poem "The Makers" Sayers asserted the interdependence of those involved in creating something, in this case the Architect, Craftsmen and Stone. After wrangling about their relative importance in the tradition of Paul's metaphor of the members of the human body (1.Corinthians.12), they decide that each has autonomy within a limited sphere while being part of a greater and controlling whole.

> Let each do well what each knows best,
> Nothing refuse and nothing shirk,

[41] Stanley Fish, *Surprised by Sin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997).
[42] We saw on p. 132 John Parker's suggestion that Marlowe's Faustus operates in this way.
[43] Sayers, *Mind*, 92.
[44] Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 149.

Since none is master of the rest,
But all are servants of the work –

The work no master may subject
Save He to whom the whole is known,
Being Himself the Architect,
The Craftsman and the Corner-stone (8).

The mutually dependent internal dynamic of a work of art is mirrored in the whole activity of producing a play. Sayers not only believed in teamwork, she enjoyed it, making props for her own plays and being present at rehearsals. Within the team the individual is charged with doing a proper job to the best of his or her ability, and each person's work is a sacramental activity analogous with God's work in creation.

The Dramatic Conflict between Jesus and Judas

Each of the first three plays of *The Man Born* is built round a single episode: the first round the Wise Men, the second John the Baptist, the third the Wedding at Cana. In Plays Four to Seven Sayers is now telling the story of that part of Jesus's ministry for which the gospels have no clear chronology and no continuous theme driving the story towards its conclusion. In the fourth play, therefore, "The Heirs to the Kingdom", Sayers establishes her own dominant themes for the rest of the series: first, Judas joins the disciples and Jesus establishes a dialogue with him about his motives and expectations, setting up a conflict that will drive the action from now on. Christologically it is established that Judas was not predestined to betray Jesus but had a choice, the outcome of which Jesus could not foresee with certainty. Secondly, as in *He That Should Come*, there is an implication that Jesus's message will include the Gentiles, symbolised by the Roman centurion Proclus, now at fifty-eight retired to Capernaum; thirdly, there is a moral debate on how to be a Christian in the world of money and material things, and it is in the give and take of everyday living that uncontextualised aphorisms quoted in the gospels are located in dialogue in which they appear to arise naturally. Fourthly and very importantly, the disciples formulate questions not only on their own behalf but also on the audience's, drawing the listener into the hermeneutical exercise of interpreting Jesus's life and teaching.

Each play has several scenes divided into sections called sequences. Sayers opens and closes most of these with the words of 'The Evangelist', and the biblical record is followed by dialogue, usually going *in medias res* to the centre of an existing

conversation and fading out at the end without either a formal opening or close. The biblical links are a constant reminder that the story is Bible-based, having something in common with the Midrashic tradition of storytelling where accretions to a basic story have an exegetical function. The technique of fading in and out is also used in film, and is comparable with multiple-viewpoint narratives such as Virginia Woolf's use of parallel streams of consciousness in *The Waves*: the listener is invited into a scene which is imagined as continuing after the listener leaves it, giving the illusion of events happening simultaneously.

The conflict between Jesus and Judas is central both to the practical task of characterisation and to the structure of the whole series. Jesus's recorded utterances in the gospels have to be expanded in such a way that he becomes a believable presence on stage, and although 'Perfect goodness is apt to be unsympathetic' (26), Sayers also found in the gospels some pointers to a Jesus who was an individual: he 'said surprising things, in language ranging from the loftiest poetry to the raciest repartee […] Nobody else, in these brief years, has achieved such an output of epigram' (26). Sayers's Jesus is a skilled and relaxed debater, and she brings him to life by using the device of polarity in which he reacts creatively to events driven by Judas: 'there was [...] that clash between His environment and Himself which is the mainspring of drama' (26). By hermeneutical and dialectical means, Sayers is able to avoid some of the clichés associated with representations of Jesus, though she sometimes sails close to the wind, for instance in giving him 'remarkable eyes' in the words of a bystander at his baptism (76). Sayers conceived the Judas narrative as determining the whole structure of *The Man Born*, and in July 1940, a few months after the initial invitation, she wrote to Welch:

> Judas is an insoluble riddle […] one can't suppose that He deliberately chose a traitor in order to get himself betrayed […] Judas must have been a case of *corruptio optimi pessima*;[45] but what corrupted him? […] If we can get a coherent Judas we can probably get a coherent plot.[46]

Frances Clemson has drawn attention to an argument by Anthony Cane that speculative suggestions about Judas's character 'cannot do justice to their scriptural

[45] The worst a corruption of the best.
[46] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 172- 3.

sources, nor to the theological challenges which Judas presents.'[47] Clemson challenges this on the grounds that Sayers's portrayal of Judas does not close off further possibilities. I would add that Judas's struggle to 'read' Jesus provides a hermeneutical paradigm which itself opens up an ongoing process beyond the play itself, as the audience's imaginative participation is directed to the 'without-endness' of the biblical record.

Judas's appearance in Play Four is significant for the audience's understanding of his character throughout the play. The first scene of this play is the one Sayers read at the controversial press conference of December 1941, dramatising a perennial problem for Christians: the proper use of money. Philip has been cheated in the market and the disciples are divided on whether to accept the loss as a practical discipline of unworldliness or whether to challenge the con-man in the interests of justice. The arguments are presented not as an abstract debate but as a response to something that affects the disciples' well-being, and the scene provides a plausible context for Jesus's parable of the Unjust Steward (Luke 16.1-13) which follows. The debate ends with Matthew's refusal of the office of treasurer on the grounds that the temptation would be too great, and at this point the door opens to reveal Judas, seeking to become Jesus's disciple. The implication of his introduction immediately following Matthew's exercise in self-knowledge is that sin, even Judas's, is not predestined but can be addressed by a person with the necessary humility. The Christology of the scene makes it clear that while Jesus did not choose Judas in order that he could be betrayed, nevertheless from the outset Jesus was aware at some level of the possibility of betrayal.

> There is no need to suppose that Jesus, with his human mind, foresees certainly or in detail what Judas will do to him. What he does know certainly is that his Father's will must be fulfilled, if not this way, then that way. But he also knows intuitively that Judas is, as it were, the key that will open the door, either on to the way of triumph or on to the way of tragedy (114).

After the parable of the Unjust Steward, Jesus concludes: 'Worldly people, you see, use far more wisdom about their trifling affairs than unworldly people do about the affairs of God. *They give their minds to what they are doing*' (118, my italics). In the novel *Gaudy Night*, Harriet discusses love affairs with Miss de Vine, a figure

[47] Frances Clemson, "Dorothy L. Sayers' Representation of Judas," in *Theology in Action: A Study Day*, ed. Geraldine Perriam (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2011), 51.

embodying intellectual rigour. De Vine says that she broke off an engagement when she realised that she was giving her fiancé less attention than her academic work, concluding as a result that she did not really love him.[48] The issue of paying attention is central to the listener's understanding of where Judas goes wrong, and is a link with Sayers's identification of integrity as the main theme of *Gaudy Night*.

The difference between Judas and the other disciples is that they refer their attempts at understanding Jesus's message back to him, whereas Judas grasps a principle and follows it in his own way. At the end of Play Four the healing at a distance of the centurion Proclus's servant is an example of pure faith from a Gentile, reinforcing Sayers's point that '[...] faith in Jesus [...] means childlike trust *in a Person*' [Sayers's italics] (208). We may note that in Luke's gospel, though not in Sayers's play, the parable of the Unjust Steward is followed by the parable of Dives and Lazarus, a story of failure of attention to the word of God: ' "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead"' (NRSV, Luke 16:31). Misinterpretation, not giving full attention, is the key to Judas's corruption. The sequence ends with Jesus's comparison of the Kingdom of Heaven with a trawling-net, making explicit the message that exegesis is in question. 'And that is how God's judgment works in the world [...] Do you understand what I am saying?' (123). Judas hears not only the moral message of judgment but also the imperative to interpret. He is given every chance to choose the right course.

Jesus is not characterised in the same way as Judas because his longer speeches are based on his recorded words. According to Welch, this was an aspect of the broadcast that ensured the Lord Chamberlain's acceptance, although technically radio plays were not subject to his jurisdiction.[49] Sayers is therefore not free to give Jesus a fully-imagined character but she is concerned that he should not be the shadowy figure of Victorian sentimental hymnody, or, as Welch put it, of 'bad stained glass and effeminate pictures'.[50] The answer is to use Judas's negative points in order to suggest that they find a positive counterpart in Jesus. The power of a negative to suggest its positive is a device used by playwrights from Shakespeare to Beckett, of whom Peter Brook says:

---

[48] Dorothy L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), 136.
[49] Welch, Foreword, *Man Born*, 15.
[50] Welch, Foreword, *Man Born*, 12.

> Beckett does not say 'no' with satisfaction; he forges his merciless 'no' out of a longing for 'yes' and so his despair is the negative from which the contour of its opposite can be drawn.[51]

Susan Gubar argues that historical interpretations of Judas's betrayal have interchangeably assigned the roles of both pacifist and rebel to him and Jesus, creating a sense that they are complementary halves of a single whole, and that this is reinforced in the iconography of the Judas kiss.[52] Sayers's Judas does indeed convince himself that he is working for Jesus's good, but it is always clear to the listeners that he is deceiving himself. A number of later writers such as the novelist Nikos Kazantzakis and playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis have gone down the route of making Judas a collaborator in the scheme of salvation, a view reinforced by the publication of the third century Coptic manuscript "The Gospel of Judas" in 2006.[53] Sayers's Judas, by refusing salvation when it is offered beyond all human expectation, creates a positive Jesus through his own negativity.

Sayers's Judas has the will to destruction and death, while Jesus has the will to life. In 1943 she wrote to a correspondent:

> […] sin (that is 'original' sin, as distinct from acts of sin) is that inner division of the will which the psychologists know and recognise: the 'will to destruction', as they call it [...] fighting against the 'will to life'.[54]

Judas assumes that when Jesus speaks of suffering he is speaking of pain voluntarily embraced for its own sake, an idea that appeals to his latent sado-masochism. Sayers implies that Judas is romantically, perhaps sexually, excited by the idea of humiliation. 'He has grasped in the abstract the idea of purgation by suffering – he sees it; but will anybody else see it? Does Jesus really understand what it means? […] "I would kill him with my hands" – if he were to let down my idea of him; that is the key speech' (136). The fictional character Baruch is a Zealot with a standing army in the hills who hopes that Jesus will be a figurehead of his cause. Judas has come to believe that the Messiah will save his people by suffering rather than

---

[51] Brook, *Empty Space*, 58.
[52] Susan Gubar, *Judas: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 2009), 232-5, 170.
[53] Kasser, Mayer and Wurst, ed., *The Gospel of Judas* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006); Nikos Kazantzakis**,** *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1960); Stephen Adly Guirgis, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).
[54] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 402.

fighting and throughout the play he is afraid that Baruch will persuade Jesus to take arms, finally receiving false confirmation of his fears from pointers Baruch has disingenuously planted. It has been argued that Baruch's plotting disguises Sayers's failure to make Judas convincing,[55] but I suggest that Judas's character is in fact coherent apart from the question of why he betrays Jesus, and that in this respect he is no more incomprehensible than Iago or Coriolanus. The silence of the record on Judas allows Sayers to introduce some minor surprises, putting the listener in the position of the witnesses within the play who do not know the outcome. This is an important device for maintaining involvement, given that the end of the story is known. When Judas is heard with the Sanhedrim for the first time, for instance, he initially subverts the listener's expectations by defending Jesus, assuring the councillors that their suspicions that Jesus is a Nationalist are unfounded (175-6). Such reversals reinforce the message that Judas is not predestined to betrayal and direct the listener to interrogate the source.

To Caiaphas Judas says, 'He *was* the Messiah, if only he had been true to himself. The noblest dreams I ever dreamed, the holiest prayer my heart could utter, all my hopes, all my ideals, seemed incarnate in him' (230). Judas's 'Jesus' is his own construct. In the next speech there is a give-away in terms of motive: 'I could have kept him straight. But he never gave me his confidence. He surrounds himself with fools and toadies – callow lads like Philip, common fishermen like Thomas and Andrew, with no more imagination than a couple of their own carp' (230). Sayers's notes show how she saw Judas's deterioration: 'I doubt whether Judas starts out with any clear idea about getting Jesus put to death – he probably only wants to stop his activities' (208-9). Both Caiaphas and Judas want Jesus to die for the sake of an idea, a mental construct that filters all their perceptions, and neither gives any thought to the reality of crucifixion, graphically described by Baruch in Play Eleven: 'Will you stand by your Messiah? [...] Skewered up there in the broiling sun, like an owl on a barn door' (272). The speech of Caiaphas which clinches Judas's betrayal coldly treats Jesus as a symbol: 'To die now – while his image in men's minds is still untarnished. Alive, he is an ordinary demagogue with all the failings of his class; dead, he is an idea - a symbol - the spirit of martyred Jewry, purged of all human dross and frailty' (230). Judas seizes Caiaphas's pretext: 'If he has lost the will to

[55] Terrie Curran, "The Word Made Flesh: The Christian Aesthetic in Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to be King*," in *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, ed. Margaret P. Hannay (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1979), 76.

follow his true destiny, we must make his words true in spite of himself' (231). The determination of both Judas and Caiaphas to create a martyr for the sake of it may remind us that this was Becket's most insidious temptation in *Murder in the Cathedral*. For the listener, it underlines the fact that Jesus does not choose martyrdom, a key point in Sayers's Christology.

The Journey to Calvary: Plays Eight to Eleven

In the first seven plays Sayers's determination that her hearers should as far as possible experience the story as if for the first time manifests itself not only in a hermeneutical emphasis but also in unexpected psychological and narrative twists. As she approaches the events of Holy Week, however, space for narrative manoeuvre is reduced by the weight of detail provided in the gospels and also by the fact that the internal hermeneutic has progressed to the point where the disciples now have a good idea of who Jesus is, though she continues to surprise her hearers by giving Jesus a commitment to saving Judas up to and beyond his betrayal.[56] Play Nine, "The King's Supper", covering both the Last Supper and Gethsemane, is according to Sayers 'the focal point of the whole series of plays' (234). From the listener's point of view, the participatory focus on hermeneutics will now give way to a presentation of the institution of the Eucharist followed by the events that retrospectively transform the remembrance into a sacrament. This play provides a new mode of involvement as the listeners bring an existing understanding of the Eucharist to Sayers's dramatisation of their original context.

Play Ten, "The Princes of This World", dramatising Jesus's trials, is technically one of the most remarkable in the series, and its fast paced narrative owes much to Sayers's skill as a detective novelist. Like Thomas More in Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Jesus will face martyrdom if he has to but it is a wrong outcome in every human way and he is not going to embrace it. Sayers was by this time a veteran creator of courtroom dramas and here, in spite of the fact that we know the outcome, she manages to ratchet up the suspense to a high pitch, playing on our knowledge that Jesus cannot escape and yet making it clear to listeners that the charge will not stand up to scrutiny. The script has already been written: Sayers uses the listeners' knowledge of the outcome to draw attention to its injustice. 'Throughout the play, he never yields an inch. The interrogation before Annas is entirely irregular; he knows

[56] Differing views on whether Judas should rightly be thought of as participating in the salvific potentiality of the footwashing are summarised in Cane, *Judas*, 89-111.

it, and says so. The evidence of the witnesses breaks down, and he will not assist the Court by engaging in any dispute. But the law does require him, as a pious Jew, to answer to the Oath of Testimony; silence here would be an admission of unorthodoxy; his answer is definite and uncompromising' (260). When Caiaphas asks if he is the Messiah and the Son of God, Jesus replies 'I am' (274), using the closely guarded name of God as a simple answer to the question, though it is also understood as being itself a Messianic claim. The revelation has a double purpose: in narrative terms it gives Caiaphas the evidence he seeks for a blasphemy conviction, and Christologically it alters the relationship of both listeners and disciples with Jesus. Once Jesus reveals himself in his full Messiahship, there is no further place for uncertainty: those who love the person for himself will either be faithful or, like Peter, know their own betrayal for what it is; those who have projected their own agenda onto Jesus will, like Caiaphas, continue to deny the truth. As Simeon says in Auden's *For the Time Being*, '[...] that which hitherto we could only passively fear as the incomprehensible I AM, henceforth we may actively love with comprehension that THOU ART.'[57]

When Judas learns from Baruch that Jesus was not plotting a coup, he experiences a devastating *anagnorisis*. Not only did he read Jesus wrongly, he read Caiaphas wrongly as well, and this as much as his betrayal of Jesus contributes to his despair. Jesus has been condemned for blasphemy, not sedition, and all Caiaphas had needed from Judas was information on his whereabouts. Judas now perceives himself as a hypocrite and a 'whited sepulchre' in fellowship with Caiaphas, the High Priest who sacrifices every year to make Atonement under the Old Covenant. As we have seen, Sayers was interested in the development of Atonement imagery as an expression of a religion's cultural context, and Judas's words signal to the listener that Christianity will transform the concept of atonement central to the Jewish faith, replacing the Old Covenant with the New. As in *The Just Vengeance*, Caiaphas refuses to acknowledge a community of guilt and dismisses Judas's rage with the words, 'Your conscience is your affair' (275). His powerlessness to help Judas is an admission that the ritual sacrifices of the Temple are of no avail to redeem the guilt of the individual soul.

[57] Auden, *Collected Poems*, 388.

In the Introduction Sayers refers to the gospel narrative as 'the greatest of all *human* tragedies' (234), and in his book on tragedy, Terry Eagleton locates Jesus's tragedy in the words of despair on the cross:

> It was because his death seemed to him a cul-de-sac, as his despairing scriptural quotation on the cross would suggest, that it could be fruitful [...] The destitute condition of humanity, if it was to be fully restored, had to be lived all the way through, pressed to the extreme limit of a descent into the hell of meaninglessness and desolation, rather than disavowed, patched up and short-circuited.[58]

Eagleton speaks of 'Jesus's engagingly human reluctance to die', which as we have seen is central to Sayers's trial scenes. Sayers's Jesus conforms with Eagleton's definition of Christian tragedy by pleading with God in Gethsemane to let the cup pass, and by uttering the cry of dereliction from the cross. In the words of Becket in *Murder in the Cathedral*, he does not do 'the right thing for the wrong reason', that is to seek martyrdom for its own sake. Eagleton quotes Una Ellis-Fermor's belief that 'any hint of a compensatory heaven' annuls the sacrifice.[59] Resurrection does not annul the tragedy of his death because he is shown as experiencing human loss of faith that it will happen, and according to Eagleton this is what makes it redemptive. In this as in other respects, Sayers's Jesus is fully human. It is also an answer to Donald MacKinnon, who like Sayers was one of the speakers at Temple's Malvern conference in January 1941, and who controversially thought that the crucifixion was a divine tragedy in which God suffered a measure of defeat.[60] Judas is shown as initially identifying himself wholeheartedly with Jesus's teaching and then perverting it as his understanding of the process of salvation takes a divergent turn. This is not the Hegelian tragedy of the conflict of two opposing positions, because Judas's understanding is a distortion of what we understand to be Jesus's truth. Eagleton says 'there is a fine line between [...] conscious wallowing in degradation [...] and a familiar kind of tragic action, in which you are forced through hell willy-nilly but thereby struggle through to a deeper kind of existence.'[61] Judas and Jesus fall either side of this fine line.

---

[58] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden, MA: Blackwell), 37.
[59] Eagleton, *Violence*, 39. Ellis-Fermor was writing in 1945, and as she was a contributor to the Bridgeheads series her approach was almost certainly familiar to Sayers.
[60] For a fuller discussion see Cane, *Judas*, 59-88.
[61] Eagleton, *Violence*, 47.

Sayers's Passion Play

Play Eleven, "King of Sorrows", is a Passion Play that can be compared with the Passion sequence in *The Just Vengeance* four years later. In both plays Jesus's speeches are limited to the relatively few words recorded in the gospels, and the task for the dramatist is to maintain Jesus's centrality in spite of this. In *The Just Vengeance* the central figure of Jesus is the one to whom all the dialogue refers, and his movement around the Church on the *Via Crucis* gives the actor an opportunity to convey weakness and pain visually. In *The Man Born*, the task is to maintain the listener's constant awareness of Jesus's presence through the reactions of the crowd, identifying the audience with the characters who view the *Via Crucis* as a spectacle. Sayers may have found a literary model for this in the influential play by Henri Ghéon, *The Way of the Cross*, translated in 1938,[62] in which chorus members comment on what is imagined as happening offstage and Jesus himself does not appear. To the evocation of brutality through the medium of radio Sayers brought the sophistication of her craft as a detective story writer, where she frequently provided limited details of violence without a full description, leaving the reader's imagination to fill out the picture. In my view, the oblique realism of Play Eleven prompts the listener to imagine a scenario far more shocking than anything that could be simulated on stage.

Play Eleven opens, as all the plays do, with the anchor of a biblical quotation followed by immediate movement *in medias res*, in this case a dialogue between two boys whose childish voices underline the horror of the event. By contrast, Mary Virgin, John and Mary Magdalen speak in a stylised way as a reminder of the scene's eternal dimension. Sayers sarcastically addressed the gap between the essential brutality of the story and the dignity popularly expected of a sacred subject in the Introduction to the plays: 'They mocked and railed on Him and smote Him, they scourged and crucified Him. Well, they were people very remote from ourselves, and no doubt it was all done in the noblest and most beautiful manner. We should not like to think otherwise' (22). In Play Ten Baruch had graphically described to Judas some of the brutalities of crucifixion. The point there was a psychological one, driving home the remoteness from reality of Judas's romantic conception of martyrdom. In

[62] Henri Ghéon, *The Way of the Cross*, trans. Frank de Jonge (London: Dacre Press: A. and C. Black, second edition 1952 (1938)).

the Passion Play the dialogue invites the reader to collaborate with the writer, director and actors in imagining the unimaginable.

Sayers's crowd members do not hold back their words or their missiles as the two robbers Dysmas and Gestas, who are tied in to the story by being Baruch's henchmen, pass by, and this gives the listener an impression of the vulgar brutality directed at crucifixion victims without offending the sensibilities of those listeners who might think the full humiliation of Jesus himself should not be represented.

GESTAS	They've knocked my blasted teeth out!
1ST SOLDIER	You won't need teeth where you're going (*Laughter*). Move on, will you!
BARUCH	[...] Hey, Dysmas, you old cattle-thief! What are you carrying there?
DYSMAS	A wooden horse with one leg [...] I'll mount him at the road's end, cully, and look down on the ruddy lot of you (*Renewed laughter*) (296).

Dysmas is the 'good thief' who is converted on the cross itself, *in articulo mortis*, and in this exchange there is chilling courage in his readiness to joke about his impending execution. When a woman throws a flower, he replies 'Thank'ee, lass. I'd rather have a pint of beer' (296). In early modern England the road from Newgate to Tyburn included a stop at a pub in St Giles for a last drink, and a standard joke was to offer to buy the criminal a drink on the way back.[63] Dysmas is the opposite of Judas because he does not 'squeal', to use Baruch's contemptuous description of Judas's betrayal, and because in his last moments he recognises Jesus for what he is and without any kind of reserve. Baruch, too, experiences a prophetic recognition of Jesus as Messiah, becoming a double for Caiaphas:

2ND WOMAN	I hate a weakling ... Get on, with you! Be a man!
BARUCH	Hold your tongue, you shrieking harridan! You don't know a man when you see one [...] To bear the unbearable – to go on when the thing is impossible – that's courage ... (*in a great shout, and with the utmost sincerity*) Hosanna, Son of Man! Hosanna! (297).

[63] www.oldbaileyonline.org, accessed 29.2.2012. Sayers herself referred to the scene's ' "Tyburn" stuff' in *Letters Two*, 373.

In performance, this is a hair-raising moment: the woman's shout to 'be a man' is in its way as horrible as the torture it makes light of, and followed by Baruch's yelled and perhaps half-believing affirmation of Jesus's Messiahship it demonstrates that Sayers had moments of being a great dramatist.

All the liturgical stations of the Cross except for the Third Fall appear in some form, with the Roman soldiers adding a commentary admiring of Jesus's stoicism. The crucifixion itself is suggested by the sound of the hammer. When the First Soldier says, 'Stretch your legs. I'll give you King of the Jews,' Jesus speaks the words 'Father forgive them' before breaking off as the mallet falls. The scene shifts quickly to Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus quizzing Caiaphas, not very courageously, about what has been done. 'Was it necessary, most Venerable, to lick the feet of Rome in public?' (301). There is grim humour in Joseph's obsequious replication of the behaviour he is condemning. Caiaphas replies in prophetic mode:

> I have killed this Jesus, who would have made more faction; but for one pretender crucified, fifty will arise [...] One day, the Zealots will revolt […] the dead will lie thick in the streets, and the tramp of the Legions will be heard in the inner Sanctuary of the Temple. I, Caiaphas, prophesy (302).

He concludes with the words: 'Be content, Jesus, my enemy. Caiaphas also will have lived in vain' (302). Caiaphas, who in Dante's Hell is crucified in the Circle of Hypocrites, the people who did evil while knowing what they were doing and pretending otherwise, has no illusions. In Sayers's terms, he chooses to call good evil, evil good for his own purposes, with no sense of a wider moral context. His prophetic double Baruch, as we saw above, speaks uncompromising truth almost without realising it.

A scene that was to prove controversial was the conversion of Dysmas, whose words 'This 'ere's just a bad dream. One o' these days you'll come out in a cloud of glory and astonish 'em all [...] Sir, you'll remember me, won't you, when you come into your kingdom?' are said, according to the stage direction, in order to humour Jesus's 'harmless lunacy' (306). When Jesus gives the traditional response Dysmas's conversion becomes genuine: 'I been bad – bad all through – you don't know how bad ... Yes, you do [...] Stay with us, Jesus, stay with us on the cross' (306). This can be another spine-tingling moment in performance, making Dysmas a type of the ordinary person who may come to believe almost accidentally, encountering Jesus

where he is least expected. Sayers's Catholicity, her belief in the Church's sacraments and also in the potentiality of the ordinary for sacramental transformation, are all apparent in this tiny scene. Within the play, there could be no stronger contrast with Judas's or with Caiaphas's distortions of the truth for their own ends.

Play Eleven concludes with several of Sayers's 'tie-rods', themes holding the structure together. It is the Centurion Proclus, a Gentile receptive to Jesus's story, who lets the women through to the cross and finally acknowledges Jesus as the Son of God in response to King Balthasar, who recognises Proclus from their meeting in Play One. 'Herod told me to slay [Jesus] and I refused. But you see they have killed him at last – and here I stand [...] Son of God he called himself – and so I believe he was' (311). At the deposition, Mary Virgin says 'Give me my son into my arms' as she did at the Nativity, and in the next play she gives Balthasar's gift of myrrh to the women who go to anoint Jesus's body. This hieratic, almost liturgical quality is balanced throughout the Passion, as we have seen, by a realism which evidences Sayers's determination to present events as they might have appeared to people experiencing them without knowing the outcome. Awareness of historical contingency is crystallised by Claudia's prophetic dream in which she seems to hear millions of voices down the centuries speaking the name of her husband in different languages: 'Suffered under Pontius Pilate [...] *gekreuzigt unter Pontius Pilatus* [...]' (310). Sensing a significance beyond what he understands, in the final scene of this play Pilate abruptly refuses to help Caiaphas to control the rumours of resurrection which are already arising (313). The mixture of hieratic, visionary and naturalistic writing in "King of Sorrows" anticipates Sayers's technique in her first post-war commission, *The Just Vengeance*.

An End and a Beginning: Play Twelve

The Crucifixion is the end made inevitable by the story but it is also the beginning of the Church. Play Twelve, "The King Comes to His Own", models possible responses to the Christian message through the disciples' varied reactions to the nine resurrection appearances. Philip's sheer fright, Thomas's demand to see physical proof, Peter's confused distress at the charge laid on him to found the Church, Jesus's enigmatic suggestion that John might wait for the Second Coming and the final announcement by the Evangelist that God's word is infinite, all open up for the

listeners the possibility of different kinds of transformation through the Power of Pentecost. Sayers says the play has 'a good deal about doors, and knockings at doors. It is, in fact, a play about the door between two worlds' (317). Recognition of Jesus is the key that opens the doors. Paying attention was a central element in the divergence between Judas and the disciples, and for those who have paid attention, recognition is now possible, even of Jesus's transfigured body. The disciples recognise Jesus immediately when he appears but the Emmaus couple can only see who he is when he breaks bread with them, signalling the importance of the sacrament of the Eucharist for recognition of Jesus in future years and ages. Those who recognise Jesus are named and claimed by him. In Play Twelve Jesus claims his followers both for the task of passing on his love in the Eucharistic community and for the transmission of that love in the infinite number of books that can and will now be written.

Sayers maintains interest through nine Resurrection appearances by once more using the device of contrast, this time in the reactions of the disciples to the resurrected Jesus. Thomas's demand for proof may be seen as paradigmatic of the listener's hermeneutic journey, where evidence is also experienced at second hand, and it is implicitly contrasted with Judas's failure to believe the evidence of his daily companionship with Jesus. Thomas's recognition is 'the only place where the word "God" is used of [Jesus] without qualification of any kind' (320). In the Gospels Thomas does not in fact thrust his hand into Jesus's wounds but immediately responds to Jesus's invitation with the affirmation of divinity. Glenn Most has argued that when Jesus names Thomas the need for proof is superseded by relationality:

> Thomas did not need, or did not dare, to touch Jesus' wounds: his change of mind was due not to his having satisfied the very same criteria of belief that he had established earlier, but to his rejecting those criteria.[64]

In Sayers's play Thomas's movement beyond his own criteria underlines the by now well-established point that belief in Jesus is belief in a person, and that he will reciprocally name and acknowledge every believer.

[64] Glenn W. Most, *Doubting Thomas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005), 58.

Sayers allows no plea in mitigation from people who choose evil when they could have done otherwise, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the character of Judas who, like Lathom in *The Documents in the Case*, is himself to some extent a victim, only deciding to betray Jesus after being tricked into thinking that Jesus is about to make an armed attack on Jerusalem. In answer to anyone who thinks Judas has been treated unfairly, Sayers comments: 'Life is like that [...] At the core of Judas are the devil's own sins of pride and unbelief' (208). Judas's failure of attention, Like Faustus's in *The Devil to Pay*, make him vulnerable to deception. His accomplice in engineering the death of Jesus is Caiaphas, who never sees Jesus as anything but a symbol and tool. Sayers says of Caiaphas's response to the Resurrection: '[...] with cynical effrontery he does not even bother to pretend that the story he proposes to circulate bears any relation to the facts [...] And he is beaten, for within a few hours [...] the rumours are flying about the City'(321). Caiaphas's lack of attention to the facts is a deliberate choice. He is not interested in a right reading, and for that he will be damned. In the Dantean formula Sayers was to use in *The Just Vengeance*, he has lost the 'good of the intellect'.[65]

The most uncompromising statement in Play Twelve that salvation is inextricably bound up with community comes when John recognises that if he hates Judas he is accepting Judas's own morality: 'If I hate him, I am his murderer too [...] Do we all murder Jesus and one another?' (324). It is John, the most innocent of the disciples, who is able to read in himself a potentiality for sin equal to that of Judas. Peter also experiences the reality of sin, and his threefold affirmation of love for Jesus balances and redeems his earlier threefold denial. Following Peter's affirmation Jesus tells the disciples: 'And you are witnesses of these things [...] then go and teach all nations' (342). The play and series end with the written word of John's testimony:

> THE EVANGELIST Amen. Even so come, Lord Jesus.
> These things are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written (343).

Play Twelve looks forward to the establishment of the Church as a community of loving exchange. In "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" Sayers says 'the Father [...] is

[65] Sayers, *Hell*, 85.

known only to himself by beholding his image in his Son,'[66] and the final play of *The Man Born* embodies this Trinitarian dynamic. The listener has journeyed with both the author and characters and is now directed back to the primary source and asked to understand that the Christian gospel is without end in several senses. Sayers's play is open-ended in that it is not a definitive version of Jesus's life although it carries the authenticity inherent in the artist's dedication to the good of the work. The plays' hermeneutical thread is a process in which multiple readings may be infinitely generated in receptive minds. The closing words of John's gospel indicate that the subject itself is inexhaustible. Sayers does not preach, but the characters of *The Man Born* interrogate each other and themselves about the meaning of Christ and how to reach it, drawing the listener into a continuing process of Christian understanding in which, as with the experience of watching *Hamlet*, each part adds to the whole in a Trinitarian and sacramental dynamic.

Reception

Evidence of the plays' success can be found in the fact that the original series was repeated four times in the five years after its first broadcast, and in the next twenty-five years the BBC did no less than four new productions.[67] Welch's Foreword quotes at length from the numerous letters he received expressing a positive response, and the overwhelming theme is that for the first time the listeners were able to visualise characters in the Bible as real people. The vociferous few who raised objections did so mainly on the grounds that Jesus was represented by an actor and that much of the dialogue was more contemporary than the Authorized Version. The speed with which several plays entered the repertoire of groups who performed plays in church is also testimony to its popularity and accessibility. Martin Browne's professional wartime touring company, The Pilgrim Players, was one such group, and Browne's wife Henzie Raeburn dates their first performance of the Nativity from *The Man Born* to 1941,[68] indicating that the first play passed into the live acting repertoire immediately. In 1942 the actor and director Pamela Keily left Browne's Pilgrim Players to work in Sheffield, and soon afterwards she was asked to direct a Passiontide reading of Sayers's Crucifixion play. Reluctant at first, she put the cast at the back of the hall to simulate a radio broadcast, the first of many such productions,

[66] Sayers, *Unpopular Opinions*, 37.
[67] Wolfe, *Churches and BBC*, 238.
[68] Henzie Browne and E. Martin Browne, *Pilgrim Story: The Pilgrim Players 1939-1943* (London: Frederick Muller, 1945), 74.

in one of which this author took part in 1966. Keily writes in her memoir: 'Suddenly one knew that this realistic portrayal of the Passion with its violence and its marked contrast to stained-glass window religion was a vehicle that could be used with real power [...] I have never known it fail if the readers have been properly rehearsed.'[69] According to Christopher Dean, Sayers told Sgt Fred Cole of Yatesbury RAF station that their 1944 staged performance of the Crucifixion scene, which Sayers attended, was the first.[70]

Wolfe ascribes to Temple the opinion that 'the cycle was one of the great contributions to the religious life of our time.'[71] There were not many reviews during 1942: most journals waited until the end of the series, by which time it was clear that the plays were a broadcasting landmark. A review in *The Times Literary Supplement* was typical:

> Stripped thus of the archaisms that have for so long encumbered the story, the drama is seen to be one that demands a verdict from the spectator and ceases to be something that can comfortably be ignored [...] It is not quite easy to place this vivid person in the list of 'Great Teachers of Mankind' and have done with him. To have shown that is a considerable achievement.[72]

Sayers's series accustomed audiences to hearing an actor in the role of Jesus, with far-reaching consequences for censorship. The prohibition on an actor's playing Jesus was relaxed in the sixties and legally dropped for all public performances in 1968. Sayers's Passion Play in particular has remained in the amateur repertoire. Nick Warburton, a scriptwriter for BBC radio and television, took the role of Jesus in a 2004 production of the whole series and his immersion in Sayers's plays generated a project to create a contemporary radio life of Christ sequence based on Luke's gospel, *Witness*, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in December 2007. Warburton shares Sayers's belief that the stories will speak for themselves if you can only get people to listen:

---

[69] Pamela Keily, *Memoirs* (privately printed, 1986), 23-4.
[70] Christopher Dean, "'A Greater Success as a Dramatist'," *Proceedings of the 2001 Second Convention* (Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2002), 4.
[71] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 234.
[72] "The Life of Christ in Drama: Miss Sayers's Radio Play," *The Times Literary Supplement*, June 19, 1943, 289.

> Our hope was that listeners who switched on without hearing the opening titles might keep listening, caught up by the surprise and power of Luke's narrative.[73]

Wolfe's account of the legacy of Sayers's plays draws attention to the fact that she and Welch had pulled off a difficult feat not only bureaucratically but also in terms of exegesis. In 1943 Welch was negotiating with Sister Penelope, CSMV, in a project to 'bring together the fruits of modern scholarship, textual criticism and the teaching of the church',[74] but the Schools Department for which it was intended was unimpressed and the project foundered. Hugh Ross Williamson was also commissioned to write a series of interludes on the life of Christ but there was little agreement over whether the story should be presented as history or theology and with the Butler Education Act of 1944 the emphasis at the BBC shifted to appropriate content for acts of daily worship. Wolfe argues that, by contrast, 'Sayers throughout managed to hold together the proclamatory post-Easter posture of the gospels themselves with the historicism of Temple's position on time and event [...] Dorothy L. Sayers had decided from the outset that this would not be "church" speaking to nation, but Christian tradition speaking to each fireside listener.'[75] The word 'each' is important: strongly opposed to preaching and believing in the reality of human choice, Sayers gave individual listeners a hermeneutical paradigm that they could make their own through a creative act of the imagination.

---

[73] Nick Warburton, "Writing Jesus: *Witness*," *Radius Performing*, vol. VI, No. 141 (Winter 2008): 1-5.

[74] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 239-42.

[75] Wolfe, *Churches and the BBC*, 237.

Chapter Eight
"Playwrights Are Not Evangelists"?

When William Temple offered Sayers a Lambeth Doctorate in 1943 in recognition of *The Man Born to be King* and *The Mind of the Maker* her refusal was based on a feeling that she might not be a true Christian: 'I should feel better about it if I were a more convincing kind of Christian. I am never quite sure whether I really am one, or whether I have only fallen in love with an intellectual pattern. And when one is able to handle language it is sometimes hard to know how far one is under the spell of one's own words.'[1] We have seen that in the post-war world intellectual assent to the creeds was increasingly dismissed as an indicator of right belief. In spite of her preoccupation with pattern, the evidence of the plays is that Sayers was never in any doubt that Christianity was ultimately a matter of the heart: the whole of *The Man Born* is a demonstration of the difference between a loving commitment to Jesus on the one hand, and the imposition of an intellectual programme onto Jesus's teaching on the other, while *The Emperor Constantine* suggests that credal formulations can only ultimately mediate salvation through a personal faith. Sayers's practice appears to be at odds with her utterances, and in this chapter I shall explore this tension in her work and suggest that it reflects a wider debate in her own time about the primacy of faith and reason. A possible resolution to such a tension can be found in Hans Urs von Balthasar's work on the doctrine of the Trinity; arguably a comparable resolution can also be inferred from Sayers's theology.

I have argued in this thesis that Sayers was an original dramatist who worked within the constraints of a commission to explore a theological vision by using the dramatic genre itself as a paradigm of theological engagement. We have seen that in her 1955 article "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists" she described her work as 'the translation of ancient and hallowed formulae into modern speech and contemporary action.'[2] The concept of translation is an important component in Sayers's theological hermeneutics, and her definition of translation to embrace action as well as speech is highly significant. Through their participatory and sacramental emphasis her plays

[1] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 429.
[2] Dorothy L. Sayers, "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists," in *World Theater*, Winter 1955/6, reprinted in *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 7 (1986): 111.

dramatise faith as a creative process, uniting hermeneutics and belief and anticipating thinking later in the century about how doctrine is received and how faith emerges.

Towards the end of her life Sayers was challenged by John Wren-Lewis, a Christian writer and broadcaster who worked for ICI, to stop concentrating on 'petrifying dogmas'[3] and say something about her personal beliefs on the grounds that this would resonate with a wider audience. Sayers's answer was the Good Friday letter of 1954, a 5000-word apologia in which she uses the phrase 'the passionate intellect' to describe her own faith.[4] Although Sayers insisted that religious emotion was closed to her, her formula 'the passionate intellect' is an important modification. Sayers's plays are paradigmatic of the indivisibility of passion and intellect, while her writing on theological aesthetics anticipates those aspects of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar which Ben Quash has characterised as the 'circling "simultaneity" of kenotic exchange', in which love is the ultimate ground of theology.[5] The tension Sayers felt between intellect and emotion can fruitfully be examined in the context of mid-century theological debates on the relation of faith and reason.

Pattern

It is important to note that even in theory Sayers's concept of pattern is not a closed system. She saw the architecture of theology as a 'steely and gigantic framework' whose 'massive intellectual coherence' (*Man Born*, 19) was an internal test of the truth of its own assertions: the details of the pattern interlock in a way that for believers is a validation of its central claim. It is possible to imagine this visually in terms of a printed fabric or wallpaper where repeating blocks of design are set up in such a way that the edges of the blocks interlock like jigsaw pieces, making the sequence literally never-ending. To press the image further, the invisibility of the joins testifies to the success of the design so that the limitless quality is an aspect of the architecture. In *The Man Born*, when Lazarus returns from the dead saying: '*This* life is like the weaving at the back of the loom. All you see is the crossing of the threads. In *that* life you go round to the front and see the wonder of the pattern' (214), the word 'wonder' introduces an affective response to the intellectual pattern.

[3] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 140.
[4] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 136-45.
[5] Ben Quash, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Theatre of the World': The Aesthetic of a Dramatics," in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, ed. Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008), 16.

In *The Mind of the Maker* and elsewhere, Sayers placed particular emphasis on the circular motion, the 'kenotic exchange', of the Trinitarian dynamic Idea, Energy and Power, involving the return of the Idea back to its source by the working of the Power through the response of the receptive soul. The Trinitarian analogy means that the act of creation involves the whole self, intellect, imagination, heart and will. At this point we may also note that the 'steely framework' of *The Man Born* is in practice not given closure but ends with the generativity of God's word, while the sacraments of the festival plays open up the infinitely expanding encounters in which the people of God are remade by Christ.

The phrase 'the passionate intellect' provided Barbara Reynolds with the title of her study of Sayers and Dante, and it may have been suggested to Sayers by her work on Dante: we read in her introduction to Dante's *Purgatorio*, written the same year as the Good Friday letter, that: 'It would never occur to [a medieval reader] that he ought to keep his head, his heart, and his religious experience in watertight compartments.'[6] The following year, in her lecture "Charles Williams: Poet's Critic", she was to quote the expression 'feeling intellect' in the work of both Williams and Wordsworth.[7] In the letter Sayers defines what she understands by religious emotion: '[…] when we say "in love with the pattern", we mean *in love* […] where the intellect is dominant it becomes the channel of all the other feelings. The "passionate intellect" is *really* passionate. It is the only point at which ecstasy can enter.'[8] Sayers is arguing that while hers is not a religion manifested in emotion, it is nevertheless productive of it as part of the process of intellectual apprehension. She felt her integrity to be threatened by demands such as Wren-Lewis's for autobiographical statements: '[…] if one is not desperately careful one finds one's self [...] exploiting one's own personality, "What Christ means to me" – "How my faith helps my work".' The alternative she proposes, as we saw in the discussion of *Constantine*, is:

> [...] if you will only leave me in peace till some truth so takes hold of me that I can honestly show it to you through the right use of my own medium, then I will make a picture for you that will be the image of that truth: and that will be not the Creeds but the substance of what is in the Creeds.[9]

[6] Sayers, *Purgatory*, 13.
[7] Sayers, *Search and Statement*, 81-2.
[8] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 138.
[9] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 140-1.

Her following sentence predicates an emotional engagement at the centre of the image-making process: 'But unless it is living truth to me, I cannot make it truth to you.'[10] Wren-Lewis was asking Sayers to break out of what he saw as theology's closed circle, but Sayers's reply in terms of the image implicitly challenges his terms, because all language about God is analogical and therefore incomplete. Sayers's description of the Trinitarian image in *Mind* is the vision of a never-ending process, and this is also true of the sacramentality of drama: every performance recreates the script in a new way and acts as a paradigm of the Church's sacraments, where divinisation happens through a time-bound event with a limitless horizon of transformation. Sayers's sacramental and Trinitarian theology always places the individual within a community, and these considerations combine to locate her within the sacramentalism of Catholic thinking about the arts at a time when Evangelicalism was transforming the religious scene.

It is worth noting, and as far as I am aware no-one else has drawn attention to this, that the Good Friday 1954 letter was written during Billy Graham's first London crusade in Harringay Arena, which startled commentators by attracting a total of not far short of two million people during its twelve-week run. The theme of Sayers's last play in 1951 had been the movement from a religion of the mind to a religion of the heart, and in this Sayers perhaps showed herself to be aware of changing patterns of public belief, though her resolution is through the Catholic sacraments. The fact that *The Emperor Constantine* was entirely in prose suggests that she may also have suspected that realism was to be the dominant mode of the decade. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* premiered in the U.K. in 1954, and before Sayers died she would have read reviews of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956).

Theological Aesthetics

Sayers's insistence on the indivisibility of intellect and emotion may be understood within the context of contemporary European debates about the claims to priority of faith and reason, particularly those associated with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth. In her insistence on the self-validating primacy of pattern Sayers may have seemed to share the belief in rationality as a criterion for reality which theologians like Balthasar challenged. In spite of the perceived intellectualism of the rationalist school of Neo-Scholasticism, however, Thomism itself was central for theologians

[10] Sayers, *Letters Four*, 140-1.

such as Gilson, who influenced Maritain, and De Lubac, who influenced Balthasar, because they argued that for Thomas himself there was a priority of faith over reasoning mediated by an omnipresent grace.[11] Sayers's theology, as we have seen, has much in common with Maritain's, and her vision of the Trinity as the dynamic centre of an unframeable pattern uses the Thomist emphasis on generativity to break out of the idea of pattern as unproductive and instead to initiate a participatory understanding which sidesteps questions of the priority of faith or reason.

Sayers's understanding of Thomism, influenced by Maritain, belongs with that of Gill and Jones, emphasising the love that is at the centre of creativity, but her habit of forthright utterance sometimes means that she appears to close down her theological options. In her response to Wren-Lewis disclaiming religious emotion she unnecessarily locks herself into the polarities of his terms, and I suggest that, by contrast, her dramatic practice and her writing on aesthetics in *The Mind of the Maker* (1941) and "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" (1944) reconcile the antithesis between faith and reason by placing reason, as Balthasar was to do, within the openness of actual discourse initiated in faith and trust. Ben Quash has argued that Balthasar's move from aesthetics into dramatics in *Theo-Drama* is mediated by the theology of Ignatius, observing that 'the discovery of truth is consequent upon participation in the world: a world whose being we do not command or compel, but which "gives itself" to us and only thus initiates our response.'[12] Participation is also the link between aesthetics and dramatic practice in Sayers's work.

Oleg Bychkov's introduction to Balthasar's aesthetics comments that 'theological aesthetics […] sees the process of interpretation, in particular in theology, as creative,'[13] and Francesca Aran Murphy suggests that the use of Beauty as a departure point by the rationalist Neo-Scholastics means in effect that even reason-based theology is grounded in faith, because there is always more in an image than its outward expression. To support her argument Murphy quotes Balthasar's argument in *Theo-Logic* that 'because there is eternally more in the depths of being and truth than we have grasped, faith has to be an immanent property of all

[11] Discussed by Francesca Aran Murphy, "Hans Urs von Balthasar: Beauty as a Gateway to Love," in *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, 7.
[12] Quash, "Theatre of the World," 20.
[13] Bychkov, Introduction, xiv.

knowing.'[14] On the basis of Bychkov's reading of trends in theological aesthetics influenced by Balthasar, Sayers's aesthetics uniting faith and reason are prophetically original, particularly as, like Balthasar, she goes back to Aristotle in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" to understand the affective content of drama. For Balthasar, '[Faith] means preferring the divine truth before one's own truth, because God is what he is. Faith is the intellect's love for God,'[15] words which recall Sayers's 'passionate intellect'. On this reading, some later twentieth-century theologians accepted the indivisibility of faith and reason, as Sayers did, in a way that sidelines the emotion of Revivalism.

God's Narrative

In using a Trinitarian model for all creation Sayers was placing herself in the tradition of G.K. Chesterton and those of her contemporaries whom he influenced in saying that God himself is a dramatist. The story of which God is author, according to Chesterton, Lewis, Owen Barfield and Austin Farrer, is one in which the myths of pagan dying and risen gods reach their definitive telling not in words but in the actions of the life of Christ. Sayers almost certainly did not meet Lewis until 1942, but she is likely to have been aware that central to his conversion around 1930 was the belief that in the Christian story "Myth became fact". This was the title of a 1945 article by Lewis, the theology of which was interrogated and developed by Austin Farrer in his article "Can Myth Become Fact?",[16] drawing on the ideas expressed in G.K. Chesterton's *The Everlasting Man*. Sayers herself was undoubtedly also influenced directly by Chesterton's book. The idea of the New Testament story as a fulfilment of what preceded it is a view also associated with Balthasar, for whom 'Christ fulfils the partial truths contained in the religious myths of all peoples.'[17] While Sayers is unlikely to have known Balthasar's early theology, his emphasis on Christianity as embracing the pagan past connects with a significant thread in her drama and that of her contemporaries.

---

[14] Murphy, "Beauty as a Gateway," 8; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory Volume I: Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000 (first published in 1947 as *Truth of the World*)), 178.

[15] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1989 (1960)), 168.

[16] 'God has constructed a myth expressive of the living truths he intends to convey': Austin Farrer, "Can myth become fact?" in *Interpretation and Belief*, ed. Charles C. Conti (London: SPCK, 1976), 167.

[17] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Volume 1*, quoted by Karen Kilby in *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), 74.

Balthasar's *Theo-Drama* explores the metaphor of life as a play of which God is the author: 'History [...] is a drama which takes place in the space opened up by the more fundamental drama played out among the persons of the Trinity.'[18] There is a comparison to be made here with Sayers's paradigm in *Mind*. For Balthasar, God is the author, director and, through the Son, the chief actor: all the agents are within the drama. Karen Kilby finds a problem with Balthasar's thought in that God, or the audience, would need to be outside the drama for a sense of the play as a whole to be possible. This is partly answered by the 'unframeability' of the dramatic experience identified by Ben Quash in his discussion of Balthasar. For Quash the audience experiences a 'hopeful orientation to a horizon of meaning',[19] assuming the possibility that the narrative itself may point truthfully to something beyond. Sayers's paradigm in *Mind* also allows for entry in and out of the Trinitarian circle of creation.

Freedom of the Creature

Quash argues that in Balthasar's Theo-dramatics, 'the pre-existing "constellation" of roles is understood as God-given; God has created a world of particular agents and these agents have manifold tasks and influences.'[20] This links with Sayers's discussion in *Mind* of the extent to which characters have an independent existence and also relates strikingly to Chesterton's play *The Surprise*, published in 1952 with an introduction by Sayers but written around 1930, in which the Author of a play runs it through twice, once with a happy ending when the outcomes are determined for the characters, and the second in which they have complete independence and are seen to wreck their own lives. At the end the Author, watching the play in the 'gods', calls a halt with the words: 'Drop it! Stop! I am coming down.'[21] For characters who have genuine free will, the Incarnation is the salvation of last resort.

Balthasar expressed the *analogia libertatis* in these words:

> […] it will occur to him that the free divine good has intended him to be this particular person, this unexchangeable person, and has consequently freely

[18] Kilby, *Balthasar*, 58.
[19] Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37.
[20] Quash, "Theatre of the World," 21.
[21] G. K. Chesterton, *The Surprise* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1952), 63.

> released him into his freedom and insight and responsibility; but that this, on the other hand, cannot simply be a matter of dismissing him, or sending him off without further interest into an estrangement from God. Rather he must realize his being as human with free, intelligent responsibility precisely by relating the image to the original, not by turning away from but by turning to God.[22]

This echoes Sayers's aesthetics in *Mind* and describes the movement of all Sayers's festival plays, in which each protagonist is brought to a realisation of the need to relate his own God-given image to the original; Judas realises this need too, but decides not to act on it.

The freedom bestowed by God has already been discussed in Chapter Two in terms of the loving friendship of people who consult each other's good. Balthasar has a deeper model of loving relation, in which a friend's knowledge of the person includes a sense of their potentialities, not just who they are now: 'Many wait only for someone to love them in order to become who they always could have been from the beginning.'[23] Balthasar describes a co-operative process of personal realisation as 'a truly creative act, in which the lover cooperates with the beloved and both try to fashion reality according to the envisaged ideality. If the result is a real, or even just approximate, correspondence, the object thereby attains its own truth, what was hidden is unveiled, and its possibilities are realised - all in accord with its primordial idea.'[24] First published in 1947, these words have strong resonances with *The Mind of the Maker* published six years earlier, particularly in the concept of the creation's 'own truth'. Balthasar insists throughout this section that 'love is inseparable from truth.'[25] For Sayers, it is the love that frees its object to choose to reciprocate which provides the opportunity to break into or out of the Trinitarian circle.

Balthasar's later *Theo-Drama* places more emphasis on the creator as being other. Love requires the otherness of its object, and in Balthasar's scheme God provides the space for action at the same time as he withdraws from it, creating a tension between the *via negativa* and the *via affirmativa*, the head and the heart. The *analogia entis* points to God and at the same time underlines the gap: to return to Charles Williams,

---

[22] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser, trans. Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), 198 (from *Klarstellungen*, 39-46).
[23] Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 114.
[24] Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 116.
[25] Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 111.

'This also is Thou; neither is this Thou', a relation similar to what Quash calls 'otherness-in-intimacy'.[26] Quash argues that the dialectic of a 'divine-human drama' was the only adequate way of construing this paradox for Balthasar.[27] For Sayers, the culmination of a narrative in a sacramental or quasi-sacramental enactment makes the same point, as the sign points to God who is both present and transcendent. Once again, while Sayers's theology is close to Balthasar's, her embodiment of it in an actual play rather than a theoretical model means that the play itself is capable of generating a plurality of equally generative responses, since every performance is different, against the comparative fixity of a written text.

According to Balthasar, the Trinitarian drama was most clearly discernible in the 'super-drama' of the Triduum, a view we have also seen expressed in Richard Harries's opinion that the Holy Week narrative is a perfect paradigm for all drama. This suggests a way in which Balthasar parts company with Sayers, since, as Quash says, 'He begins […] to develop an aesthetic of suffering in which certain shapes of suffering - certain cries – will be privileged over certain other shapes. He tells the story of the West's dramatic literature in a way that is governed by its search for models of Christ-likeness.'[28] I suggest that Sayers's protagonists are deliberately un-Christ-like, but that the dynamic of the plays is that they will move towards submission to the will of God and receptiveness to his creative gift of freedom, a process we see most strikingly at work in the Airman's final identification with the crucified Christ. When Wren-Lewis accused her of arid intellectualism, Sayers might have replied by pointing to contemporary theological debates about the nature of faith and love as hermeneutic principles. She might also simply have directed him to her drama, which enacts the Balthasarian principle that truth is apprehended within an engaged and faithful response to the world. For Balthasar, this was expressed theoretically in the magisterial volumes of *Theo-Drama*, and Sayers also explored the theme theoretically in *The Mind of the Maker*, but she insisted that her apologetics were secondary to the continuing and evolving revelation embodied in the plays and their reception. As we have seen, in the plays the participants are fully engaged in an explicit response to God with an increasingly sacramental emphasis. They enact a drama which itself is paradigmatic of God's action within the world.

[26] Quash, "Theatre of the World," 24.
[27] Quash, "Theatre of the World," 26.
[28] Quash, "Theatre of the World," 29.

For Sayers the love of the object that wills its freedom liberates it for the generativity that mirrors God's, while Balthasar places emphasis on the need for the image to turn back to God. For Balthasar the metaphor is about transformation to bring the image in line with the original idea, while Sayers's aesthetic grounded in the performance of drama is generative in a way that Balthasar's overarching metaphor is not. We have seen that the return of the Idea to God is central to Sayers's aesthetics, but the purpose of that return is the completion of a transformation not just of the Idea itself but of the whole drama as realised by its participants. Sayers's perception in "Towards a Christian Aesthetic" is of the work of art as a new and independent thing that can be endlessly renewed as new actors, new productions and new audiences create an infinite variety of performances, what David Jones called 'without-endness'. For Sayers the reader or audience of a work of art is active in constituting the meaning, while Balthasar's definition of the *analogia libertatis* does not seem to allow for sacramental participation in new acts of creation.

For Balthasar, in a reaction to Neo-Scholastic intellectualism, understanding is mediated by engagement within the dramatic metaphor that encompasses both God and the created world. For Sayers, however, the Trinitarian analogy of creation in one sense makes engagement in divine activity unavoidable, but the fact that it is an analogy creates a different kind of 'otherness' from Balthasar's: God is present in all creation and creativity, but it is necessary to see God as other in order to love him, and thus consciously step into a participatory relationship. As we have seen, human choice is central to everything Sayers wrote. Balthasar's overarching metaphor embracing the whole of creation is not an essentially participatory and transformative vision, more a way of describing an unchanging circumstance. For Sayers, the sacramental nature of drama is able to focus the limitless possibilities of 'without-endness' through a consciously-willed participatory and time-bound sacramental act involving actors and audience. Sayers anchors the metaphor of God as the author of creation's drama in the sacramental participation of humans in the development of their own story.

Playwrights are not Evangelists

We have seen that in the Introduction to *The Man Born* Sayers insisted that her object was not to 'do good' but to write as good a play as possible in the belief that good art inevitably mediates the divine, and that she followed Maritain in asserting

the good of the work is the artist's only goal, revealing the truth of God 'without *doing it on purpose,* and because it was not done on purpose'.[29] There is a very clear distinction in Sayers's mind between true and false art, which may have been influenced by Maritain's distinction between Art and Prudence: as we have seen in Chapters Three and Four, Art exists for its own sake whereas the works of Prudence are associated with people, morality and considerations of context. 'If [art] aims at emotion, at affecting or rousing the passions, it becomes adulterate.'[30] Sayers's refusal to be an evangelist derives from the belief that an evangelising purpose would result in bad art, and this in turn would reduce any power her work had as evangelism. 'It is [the playwright's] business not to save souls but to write good plays. Should he forget this fact, he will lose his professional integrity, and with it all his power – including his power to preach the Gospel.'[31] She represents the artist as a conduit between theology and its realisation in drama, and although she recognises the potential distortion of an evangelising approach, she does not acknowledge the situatedness of every approach. Mitigating factors, however, are her belief that good art critiques its subject matter, and the fact that a hermeneutic imperative is embodied in the way she dramatises her material, prompting the audience to interrogate the work.

In the course of this chapter we have tried to resolve the apparent tension between head and heart in Sayers's writing by drawing on the synthesis proposed by Sayers herself, following Maritain, and also on the subsequent work of von Balthasar and his exegetes. Balthasar's definition of faith as 'the intellect's love for God' chimes closely with Sayers's refusal to separate the intellectual and the affective, a refusal she made central to the novel *Gaudy Night* and went on to embody in the plays: in *Zeal* William's 'unsleeping arches' proclaim that 'to labour is to pray.' William's work represents 'all that was good in me,/All that was God' (*Zeal*, 99) and it is his earlier failure to realise that the two are indivisible that makes him challenge God. Faustus's intellectual quest allows little room for the love that pays unswerving attention to its object, but the audience sees that if he had allowed himself to love the image of God in Lisa she would have directed his attention back to his self-sacrificing work with suffering people. Paying attention is an indispensable aspect of love in *The Man Born*, while in *The Just Vengeance* the Airman's total surrender

[29] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 49.
[30] Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 50.
[31] Sayers, "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists," 109.

mirrors Christ's own loving sacrifice and is reached through a process of 'understanding'. In Constantine's efforts to be a good ruler and a decent human being there is remarkably little love, and at the end of the play he comes to see that this is what has gone wrong. In answer to Wren-Lewis Sayers defended herself by changing the terms of the debate to make head and heart indivisible: in all Sayers's drama the protagonist achieves understanding through realising the central importance of faith and love for hermeneusis, and increasingly she embodies this theology within sacramental enactment.

In conclusion I suggest that Sayers's insistence on the integrity of the work of art was profoundly influential in circles where drama was recognised as a means of exploring issues of faith. Sayers was on the fringes of the Religious Drama Society, whose president was Bishop George Bell of Chichester and whose policy was largely determined by T.S. Eliot's director, E. Martin Browne. As we saw in Chapter One, Browne was more explicit than Sayers in his belief that during the performance of a play the actors and audience would share an event of which the Eucharist was the paradigm, and this led him to define all serious drama as essentially religious, sidestepping the need for evangelistic content. By contrast, Bell was slower than Sayers and Browne to preach a theology of the arts that refused to regard them as tools for evangelisation, possibly because he thought that church people for whom the arts were suspect might be won over by an evangelistic argument. In 1941 Sayers wrote, 'It's not a matter of the Church "getting hold of the Arts", as the Bishop of Chichester seems to imagine. It's a matter of (a) presenting the artist with a brand of Christianity which can inform and inspire his secular work, and (b) recognising the autonomy of the artist's vocation as such.'[32]

In 1944 Bell called a conference in Chichester on "The Church and the Artist". The emphasis was on painting and sculpture and those present included Duncan Grant and Henry Moore. T.S. Eliot was present, but it was Sayers whom Bell invited to introduce a session on "The Problem of Translation (Communication)". According to Bell's memorandum, Sayers argued that familiarity with dogma should be the background to an artist's search for an accessible contemporary language, a point reinforced by Eliot in discussion: '[theology's] main function (almost unconscious)

[32] Sayers, *Letters Two*, 334.

was negative: it kept the writer right.'[33] Although in 1941 Sayers had clearly believed that Bell was failing to grasp the importance of an artist's freedom to serve the work, over the next dozen years he came to accept that it was counter-productive for the Church to put constraints on artists, and, as we saw in Chapter Two, he wrote: 'the Church [...] must be prepared to trust its chosen artists to begin their work and carry it through to the end as the fulfilment of a trust.'[34] I suggest that Sayers's influence can be seen in this development, and that her own plays together with her writing on aesthetics were instrumental in bringing about an approach to drama in which Eliot's post-war plays and those of other religious verse-dramatists were increasingly premiered in the commercial theatre. I have argued in Chapter Six that Sayers responded to changes in the religious zeitgeist with her last play, and I believe that far from being derivative, as some critics have claimed, Sayers was an original playwright who arguably used the dramatic medium more successfully than any other twentieth century writer as a means of embodying theological ideas.

[33] George Bell, Memorandum, Bell 151/190-96. MS Bell, Lambeth Palace Library.

[34] Quoted in Ronald C.D. Jasper, *George Bell, Bishop of Chichester* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 133.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Auden, W.H. *Collected Poems*. Edited by Edward Mendelson. London: Faber and Faber, revised edition 2007.

------- *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*. Vintage International: 1989 (1962).

Aulen, Gustaf. *Christus Victor*. Translated by A.G. Hebert. London: SPCK, 1980 (1931)).

Baillie, Donald M. *The Theology of the Sacraments and Other Papers*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957.

Balthasar, Hans Urs von. *Explorations in Theology 1: The Word Made Flesh*. Translated by A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru. New York: Herder and Herder, 1964.

------- *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory Volume I: Truth of the World*. Translated by Adrian J. Walker. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000 (1947).

------- *The von Balthasar Reader*. Edited by Medard Kehl and Werner Löser and translated by Robert J. Daly and Fred Lawrence. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982.

Bell, G.K.A. *Christianity and World Order*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1940.

------- "Church and Artist." *The Listener*, 14 September 1944, 298.

Bettenson, Henry, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. London: Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Brook, Peter. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin Books, 1968.

Buckton, A.M. *Eager-Heart: A Christmas Mystery Play*. London: Methuen, 1934 (1904).

Chesterton, G.K. *The Selected Works*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2008.

------- *Orthodoxy*. Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishing, 2006 (1908).

------- *The Everlasting Man*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1925.

------- *The Surprise.* London: New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952.

Clements, Keith, ed. *The Moot Papers: Faith, Freedom and Society 1938-1944*. London: New York: T. and T. Clark, 2010.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Edited by H.J. Jackson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

------- *Biographia Literaria*. Edited by J. Shawcross. 2 vols. Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1907.

Davey, Francis Noel, ed. *The Fourth Gospel by Edwyn Clement Hoskyns*. London: Faber and Faber, 1947 (1940).

------- "The Christian Religion and Drama." *Christian Drama*, vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1947): 1-3.

Demant, V.A. Introduction to *Our Culture: Its Christian Roots and Present Crisis: Edward Alleyn Lectures 1944*, edited by V.A. Demant, 1-16. London: SPCK, 1947.

Eliot, T.S. *The Rock*. London: Faber and Faber, 1934.

------- *Murder in the Cathedral*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.

------- *The Family Reunion.* London: Faber and Faber, 1939.

------- *The Idea of a Christian Society*. London: Faber and Faber, 1939.

------- *Poetry and Drama*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.

------- *The Complete Poems and Plays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1969.

------- *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Edited by Frank Kermode. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.

Farrer, Austin. *The Glass of Vision*. Westminster: Dacre Press, 1948.

Forsyth, P.T. *The Work of Christ*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910.

------- *The Church and the Sacraments*. London: Independent Press, 1917.

Ghéon, Henri. *The Way of the Cross*. Translated by Frank de Jonge. London: Dacre Press: A. and C. Black, 1952 (1938).

Gilson, Etienne. *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*. Translated by A.H.C. Downes. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1940.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Faust*. Translated by John R. Williams. Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 2007.

Golding, William. *The Spire*. London: Faber and Faber, 1964.

Guirgis, Stephen Adly. *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot: A Play*. London: Faber and Faber, 2006.

Hebert, A.G. *Liturgy and Society: The Function of the Church in the Modern World*. London: Faber and Faber, 1935.

Hill, Edmund, trans. *The Works of St Augustine: The Trinity*. New York: New York City Press, 1991.

Hone, Ralph E., ed. *Poetry of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Hurstpierpoint and Wheaton, Illinois: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society in association with the Marion E. Wade Center, 1996.

Jones, David, *Epoch And Artist: Selected Writings by David Jones*. Edited by Harman Grisewood. London: Faber and Faber, 1959.

Kasser, Rodolphe; Mayer, Marvin; Wurst, Gregor, eds, *The Gospel of Judas*. Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2006.

Kazantzakis**,** Nikos. *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1960.

Lees, Madeline. *The Lytchett-Minster Nativity Play* (1941). 4th edition printed for private circulation, 1949.

Lewis, C.S. *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis Volume II: Books, Broadcasts and the War, 1931-1949*. Edited by Walter Hooper. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004.

------- *Collected Letters Volume Three: Narnia, Cambridge and Joy 1950–1963*. Edited by Walter Hooper. HarperCollins Publishers. Kindle Edition.

------- *The Screwtape Letters*. London: Glasgow: Fontana, 1968 (1942).

------- "Myth Became Fact" (1944). In *God in the Dock*, edited by Walter Hooper, 39-45. London: Fount Paperbacks, 1979.

------- *That Hideous Strength*. London: Pan Books, 1983 (1945).

------- *Of This and Other Worlds*. Edited by Walter Hooper. London: William Collins, 1982.

Macmurray, John. *Freedom in the Modern World*. New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1968 (1932)).

Mann, Thomas. *Doctor Faustus*. Translated by H.T. Lowe-Porter. London: Secker and Warburg, 1959 (1949)).

Maritain, Jacques. *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*. Translated by J.F. Scanlan. London: Sheed and Ward, 1947 (1930).

Marlowe, Christopher. *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* (the B-Text, 1616). In *The Plays*, 207-69. Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2000.

Masefield, John. *Good Friday*. London: William Heinemann, 1921 (1916).

------- *The Coming of Christ*. London: William Heinemann, 1928.

Nadeem, Shahid; Ronder, Tanya. *Dara*. UK: Nick Hern Books, 2015.

Oldham, J.H. *The Resurrection of Christendom*: *The Christian News-Letter Books*, no.1. London: The Sheldon Press: New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940.

------- ed. *The Church Looks Ahead: Broadcast Talks*. London: Faber and Faber, 1941.

Purvis, J.S., ed. *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Shorter Version of the Ancient Cycle*. London: SPCK, 1951.

Quick, Oliver Chase. *The Christian Sacraments*. London: Nisbet, 1927.

Sayers, Dorothy L. *Op. 1*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1916.

------- *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1918.

------- *Whose Body?* London: New English Library, 1968 (1923).

------- *Unnatural Death*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1941 (1927)).

------- *Lord Peter Views the Body*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962 (1928).

------- ed. *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror*, 3 vols. London: Victor Gollancz, 1928, 1931, 1934.

------- trans., *Tristan in Brittany*. London: Ernest Benn, 1929.

------- *The Nine Tailors*. London: New English Library, 1979 (1934).

------- *Strong Poison*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1930.

------- *Murder Must Advertise*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1933.

------- *Gaudy Night*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1935.

------- *Busman's Honeymoon*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1937.

------- *Love All*, with *Busman's Honeymoon* by Dorothy L. Sayers and Muriel St Clare Byrne. Edited by Alzina Stone Dale. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1984.

------- *The Zeal of Thy House*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1937.

------- *The Greatest Drama Ever Staged*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938.

------- *The Devil to Pay*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1939.

------- *Strong Meat*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939.

------- *Begin Here: A War-time Essay*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1940.

------- *The Mind of the Maker*. London: Methuen, 1941.

------- *The Man Born to be King*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1943.

------- *Even the Parrot: Exemplary Conversations for Enlightened Children*. London: Methuen, 1944.

------- *The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II*. Edited by Suzanne Bray. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008.

------- *The Just Vengeance*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1946.

------- *Unpopular Opinions*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1946.

------- *Creed or Chaos? and Other Essays in Popular Theology*. London: Methuen, 1947.

------- *Four Sacred Plays*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1948.

------- trans. *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell.* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949.

------- trans. *The Divine Comedy 2: Purgatory*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955.

------- trans. *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradise*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.

------- *The Emperor Constantine*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1952.

------- "Types of Christian Drama: With Some Notes on Production (1952)." *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review* vol. 2 (1981): 84-99.

------- and Nott, Kathleen. "A Debate Deferred," incorporating Sayers, "The Dogma in the Manger" (1954) and Nott, "Notes Towards a Reply" (1982). *VII: An Anglo- American Literary Review* vol. 3 (1982): 34-48.

------- *Introductory Papers on Dante*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1954).

------- *Further Papers on Dante*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2006 (1957)

------- "Playwrights Are Not Evangelists." *World Theatre* V:1 (Winter 1955-56): 61-6. Reprinted in *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 7 (1986): 109-13.

------- *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963.

------- *Wilkie Collins: A Critical and Biographical Study*. Edited by E.R. Gregory from the Manuscript Humanities Research Centre Austin, Texas. Toledo, Ohio: Friends of the University of Toledo Libraries, 1977.

------- *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers 1899-1936: The Making of a Detective Novelist*. Edited by Barbara Reynolds. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995.

------- *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Two: 1937-1943: From Novelist to Playwright*. Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1997.

------- *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Three: 1944-1950: A Noble Daring*. Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.

------- *The Letters of Dorothy L. Sayers, Volume Four: 1951-1957: In the Midst of Life*. Edited by Barbara Reynolds. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.

Temple, William. *Mens Creatrix*. London: Macmillan, 1917.

------- *Nature, Man and God*. London: Macmillan, 1953 (1934).

------- Opening Address in *Malvern, 1941: The Life of the Church and the Order of Society, being the proceedings of the Archbishop of York's conference*, 9-15. London: Longmans, Green, 1941.

------- *Christianity and Social Order*. London: SCM Press, 1942.

------- *Readings in St John's Gospel* (First and Second Series). London: Macmillan, 1950.

Thiessen, Gesa Elsbeth, ed. *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*. London: SCM Press, 2004.

Thorndike, Sybil. *God in the Modern World: Religion and the Stage*. London: Ernest Benn, 1928.

Tolkien, J.R.R. *Tree and Leaf* (1964). London: HarperCollins, 2001.

Waugh, Evelyn. *Helena*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1950.

Welch, James. Foreword to *The Man Born to be King* by Dorothy L. Sayers, 9-16. London: Victor Gollancz, 1943.

Whale, J.S. *Christian Doctrine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1941.

Williams, Charles. *Three Plays*. London: Oxford University Press, 1931.

------- *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. London: Oxford University Press, 1936.

------- *Descent into Hell*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1966 (1937).

------- *He Came Down From Heaven*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984 (1938).

------- *The Descent of the Dove*. London: Longmans, Green, 1939.

------- *Judgement at Chelmsford*. London: Oxford University Press, 1939.

------- *The Figure of Beatrice*. London: Faber and Faber, 1943.

------- *Seed of Adam and Other Plays*. Edited by Anne Ridler. London: New York: Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1948.

------- *The Image of the City and other essays*. Edited by Anne Ridler. Berkeley, CA: The Apocryphile Press, 2007 (1958).

Woolf, Virginia, *Between the Acts*. Edited by Susan Dick and Mary S. Millar. Oxford: Blackwell for the Shakespeare Head Press, 2002 (1941)).

Biographical, Critical, Historical and Theological Studies

Ackroyd, Peter. *T.S. Eliot*. London: Abacus, 1985**.**

Barker, Margaret. *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy*. London: Continuum, 2003.

Baxter, Kay M. *Contemporary Theatre and the Christian Faith*. London: SCM Press, 1964.

Beckwith, Sarah. *Signifying God: Social Relation and Symbolic Act in the York Corpus Christi Plays*. Chicago: London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Brabazon, James. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Biography*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1988 (1981).

Bray, Suzanne, ed. Introduction and Commentary to *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Christ of the Creeds and Other Broadcast Messages to the British People during World War II*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008.

------- "Dorothy L. Sayers: Disciple and Interpreter of Charles Williams." In *Charles Williams and His Contemporaries*, edited by Suzanne Bray and Richard Sturch, 93-116. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.

------- "Dorothy L. Sayers and Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*." In *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Convention, 2009*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 67-72. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2010.

------- "Theological, Historical and Stylistic Influences on Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Man Born to be King*." In *Theology in Action: A Study Day*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 33-47. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2011.

Billington, Michael. *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945*. London: Faber and Faber, 2007.

Brown, Janice. *The Seven Deadly Sins in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1998.

Browne, E. Martin. *The Production of Religious Plays***.** London: Philip Allan, 1932.

------- "The Dramatic Verse of T.S. Eliot." In *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium*, edited by Richard March and Tambimuttu, 196-207. London: Poetry London Editions, 1948.

Browne, Henzie, with E. Martin Browne. *Pilgrim Story: The Pilgrim Players 1939-1943*. London: Frederick Muller, 1945.

Brunsdale, Mitzi. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Solving the Mystery of Wickedness*. New York: Berg, 1990.

Butler, Elizabeth M. *The Fortunes of Faust*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1998 (1952).

Bychkov, Oleg and Fodor, James, eds. *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*. Abingdon: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2008.

Cane, Anthony. *The Place of Judas Iscariot in Christology*. Aldershot: Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005.

Carey, John. *William Golding*. London: Faber and Faber, 2009.

Carpenter, Humphrey. *The Inklings*. London: HarperCollins, 2006 (1978).

Cassel, Elaine and Bernstein, Douglas A. *Criminal Behavior*. Boston: London: Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.

Cavaliero, Glen. "Charles Williams and 20th Century Verse Drama." In *Charles Williams: a Celebration*, ed. Brian Horne, 194-205. Leominster: Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, 1995.

Clements, Keith. *Faith on the Frontier: A Life of J.H. Oldham*. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1999.

Clemson, Frances. "Dorothy L. Sayers' Representation of Judas." In *Theology in Action: A Study Day*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 49-59. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2011.

Coomes, David. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Careless Rage for Life*. Oxford: Lion Books, 1992.

Conti, Charles C., ed. *Interpretation and Belief*. London: SPCK, 1976.

Crowther, Colin. *A Theatre of Hope: Religious Drama in Twentieth Century England*. Published by the author, 1995.

Curran, Terrie. "The Word Made Flesh: The Christian Aesthetic in Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Man Born to be King*." In *As Her Whimsey Took Her: Critical Essays on the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers*, edited by Margaret P. Hannay, 73-7. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1979.

Danchev, Alex. *Cezanne: A Life*. London: Profile Books, 2012.

D'Avray, David. "Feastdays and Preaching." In *Elite and Popular Religion*, edited by Kate Cooper and Jeremy Gregory, 162-79. Woodbridge: Rochester, NY: Boydell and Brewer for the Ecclesiastical History Society, 2006.

Dean, Andrew. "Music in the Dramatic Works of Dorothy L. Sayers." In *Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Convention, 2007*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 23-30. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008.

Dean, Christopher, ed. *Studies in Sayers*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1994.

------- "'A Greater Success as a Dramatist'." In *Proceedings of the 2001 Second Convention*, edited by Val Meadowcroft and Janet Hunt, 1-10. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2002.

------- ed. *Further Studies in Sayers*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2004.

Dinsman, Melissa. "Parody, Play, and Purposeful Deconstruction: A Discussion of Umberto Eco's Hermeneutic Theory in Relation to His Parodic Practice." *Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol. 23, no. 1 (2012): 70-88.

Downing, Crystal. *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*. New York: Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Durkin, Mary Brian. *Dorothy L. Sayers*. Boston: Twayne, 1980.

Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002.

------- *On Evil*. New Haven: London: Yale University Press, 2010.

Eco, Umberto. "Semiotics of Theatrical Performance." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 21, no. 1, Theatre and Social Action Issue (March 1977): 107-17.

------- *Reflections on* The Name of the Rose. Translated by William Weaver. London: Secker and Warburg, 1985.

Ellis-Fermor, Una. *The Frontiers of Drama*. London: Methuen, 1945.

Every, George. *Poetry and Personal Responsibility*. London: SCM Press, 1949.

Fairclough, Alan. "Dorothy Sayers and Religious Drama in England: *The Just Vengeance*." *Christian Drama* vol. 1, no. 1 (November 1946): 3-9.

Farrer, Austin. "Can myth become fact?" In *Interpretation and Belief*, edited by Charles C. Conti, 165-75. London: SPCK, 1976.

Ferguson Smith, Martin. "Dorothy L. Sayers and the Somersham Pageant of 1908." *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 28 (2011): 79-96.

Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997 (1967).

Fletcher, Christine M. *The Artist and the Trinity: Dorothy L. Sayers' Theology of Work*. Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2013.

Forssmann, Holger. "Karl Barth – Dorothy L. Sayers: An Introduction to their Correspondence." In *Proceedings of the Meeting at the Malteser Kommende Ehereshoven, 2-5 June 2006*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 17-32. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2006.

French, Patrick. *Younghusband*. London: HarperCollins, 1994.

Gaillard, Dawson. *Dorothy L. Sayers*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981.

Garnett, Jane; Grimley, Matthew; Harris, Alana; Whyte, William; Williams, Sarah, ed. *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives*. London: SCM Press, 2007.

Grainger, Roger. *Theatre and Encounter: The Psychology of the Dramatic Relationship*. North America and International: Trafford Publishing, 2014.

Gubar, Susan. *Judas: A Biography*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.

Habgood, John. "The Nicene Creed." In *Proceedings of the 1990 Seminar*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1991 (no page numbers or ed.).

Hadfield, Alice Mary. *An Introduction to Charles Williams*. London: Robert Hale, 1959.

Hall, Trevor H., ed. *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies*. London: Duckworth, 1980.

Hannay, Margaret P., ed. *As Her Whimsey Took Her*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979.

Antonina Harbus. "Colchester's Legend on Stage: *The Emperor Constantine* by Dorothy L. Sayers." *Modern Drama* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 87 – 107.

Harmon, Robert B. and Burger, Margaret A. *An Annotated Guide to the Works of Dorothy L. Sayers*. New York: London: Garland Publishing, 1977.

Harp, Richard L. "*The Mind of the Maker*: The Theological Aesthetics of Dorothy L. Sayers and Its Application to Poetry." In *As Her Whimsey Took Her*, edited by Margaret P. Hannay, 176-99. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979.

Harries, Richard. *Art and the Beauty of God*. London: New York: Mowbray, 1993.

Harris, Max. *Theatre and Incarnation*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1990.

Hastings, Adrian. *A History of English Christianity, 1920-1990*. London: SCM Press, 1991.

------- "William Temple." In *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism*, edited by Geoffrey Rowell, 211-26. Wantage: Ikon Productions, 1992.

Hein, David and Henderson, Edward, eds. *C.S. Lewis and Friends*. London: SPCK, 2011.

Hiley, Margaret. *The Loss and the Silence: Aspects of Modernism in the Works of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams*. Zurich: Walking Tree Publishers, 2011.

Hitchman, Janet. *Such a Strange Lady*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Hobson, Harold. "Constantine: *Christ's Emperor*, St. Thomas's Church, Regent St." Review of *Christ's Emperor*, by Dorothy L. Sayers. *The Sunday Times*, February 10, 1952, 2.

Hone, Ralph E. *Dorothy L Sayers: A Literary Biography*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1979.

Hopkins, Antony. *Beating Time*. London: Sydney: Futura Publications, 1983.

------- "*The Just Vengeance*: Writing the Music." In *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar*, 46-57. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988.

Horne, Brian, ed. *Charles Williams: a Celebration*. Leominster: Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, 1995.

Horner, Olga. "The Law That Never Was: A Review of Theatrical Censorship in Britain." *Medieval English Theatre* 23 (2001): 34-96.

------- "The Law That Never Was – A Codicil: The Case of *The Just Vengeance*." *Medieval English Theatre* 24 (2002): 104-15.

Hunt, Margaret. "All the Church's a Stage?" In *Sidelights on Sayers*, vol. 50, edited by Christine R. Simpson, 73-7. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2000.

Huttar, Charles A., ed. *Imagination and the Spirit: Essays in Literature and the Christian Faith Presented to Clyde S. Kilby*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Act of Reading*. London: Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

Jasper, Ronald C.D. *George Bell, Bishop of Chichester*. London: Oxford University Press, 1967.

Jasper, Tony and Pickering, Kenneth. *Jesus Centre Stage*. Godalming: Highland Books, 2010.

Johnson, Todd E. and Savidge, Dale. *Performing the Sacred*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009.

Jones, A.H.M. *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978 (1948).

Keating, H.R.F. "Dorothy L.'s Mickey Finn." In *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*, edited by Alzina Stone Dale, 129-38. New York: Walker, 1993.

Keily, Pamela. *Memoirs*. Privately printed, 1986.

Kenney, Catherine. *The Remarkable Case of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1981.

Kent, John. *William Temple*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Kernodle, George R. "England's Religious-Drama Movement." *College English*, vol. 1, no. 5 (February 1940): 414-26.

Kilby, Karen. *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans, 2012.

King, Pamela M. *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2006.

Kinzig, Wolfram and Volp, Ulrich, eds. *God and Murder: Literary Representations of Religion in English Crime Fiction* (*Darstellungen von Religion in englischsprachiger Kriminalliteratur*). Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008.

Knapp, Jeffrey. "Preachers and Players in Shakespeare's England." *Representations* 44 (1993): 29-59.

Knowles, Sebastian D.G. "The Looking Glass War: Warping the Contemporary Record in *Between the Acts*." In *A Purgatorial Flame: Seven British Writers in the Second World War*, 36-61. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990.

Lambourne, Norah. "*The Just Vengeance*: Dressing and Staging." In *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar*, 28-45. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988.

------- "Designing the Play." In *Proceedings of the 1990 Seminar*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1991(no page numbers or ed.).

------- "Dressing the Play." In *Proceedings of the 2001 Second Convention*, edited by Val Meadowcroft and Janet Hunt, 11-16. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2002.

Lamp Mead, Marjorie. “Rejoicing in Truth: Dorothy L. Sayers and the ‘Good of the Intellect’.” In *Further Studies in Sayers*, edited by Christopher Dean, 23-30. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2004.

Leith, William. “The Real Michael Sheen.” *The Times Magazine* (22 October 2011): 41.

Leonardi, Susan. *Dangerous by Degrees: Women at Oxford and the Somerville College Novelists*. New Brunswick: London: Rutgers University Press, 1989.

Lewis, C.S. “The Mind of the Maker.” Review of *The Mind of the Maker* by Dorothy L. Sayers. *Theology* 43, no. 256, October 1941, 248-9.

Lindop, Grevel. *Charles Williams: The Third Inkling*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Loades, Ann. “Dorothy L. Sayers: War and Redemption.” In *C.S. Lewis and Friends*, edited by David Hein and Edward Henderson, 53-70. London: SPCK, 2011.

------- “Creativity, Embodiment and Mutuality: Dorothy L. Sayers on Dante, Love and Freedom.” In *God And Freedom: Essays in Historical and Systematic Theology*, edited by Colin Gunton. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1995, 103-18.

Loughlin, Gerard. *Telling God’s Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

MacCarthy, Fiona. *Eric Gill*. London: Faber, 1989.

MacCulloch, Diarmaid. *A History of Christianity*. London: Penguin Books, 2009.

McAfee Brown, Robert. “Charles Williams: Lay Theologian.” In *Theology Today*, 10 (July 1953): 212-29.

McInerny, Ralph. *Art and Prudence: Studies in the Thought of Jacques Maritain*. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

The Manchester Guardian. “Lichfield’s Festival Play.” June 17, 1946, 3.

Mascall, Eric. “What Happened to Dorothy L. Sayers that Good Friday?” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 3 (1982): 9-18.

Milbank, Alison. *Chesterton and Tolkien as Theologians: The Fantasy of the Real*. London and New York: T. and T. Clark, 2009.

Miskimmin, Esme. “‘Not Peace but a Sword’: Religious Aspects of Dorothy L. Sayers’ Detective Fiction.” In *Occasional papers No. 3: Sayers in the 21st Century*, edited by Margaret Hunt, 45-51. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003.

Moorman, Charles. *The Precincts of Felicity: The Augustinian City of the Oxford Christians*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1966.

Morra, Irene. *Verse Drama in England, 1900-2015: Art, Modernity and the National Stage*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016.

Most, Glenn W. *Doubting Thomas*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: London: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Murphy, Francesca Aran. "Hans Urs von Balthasar: Beauty as a Gateway to Love." In *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, edited by Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor, 5-17. Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008.

Nash, David. *Blasphemy in the Christian World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Nicholson, Steve. *The Censorship of British Drama 1900-1968*, 4 vols. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2003, 2005, 2011, 2015.

Nott, Kathleen. *The Emperor's Clothes.* London: Heinemann, 1953.

O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970 (1961)).

Parker, Anthony. *Pageants, their Presentation and Production*. London: The Bodley Head, 1954.

Parker, John. *The Aesthetics of Antichrist: From Christian Drama to Christopher Marlowe*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2007.

Patrick, James. *The Magdalen Metaphysicals: Idealism and Orthodoxy at Oxford, 1901-1945*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985.

Pickering, Kenneth. *Drama in the Cathedral*. Malvern: J. Garnet Miller, 1986, revised 2001.

------- "The Mind of the Dramatist." In *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar*, 11-27. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988.

------- "The Found Space." In *Joint Meeting of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society and the Charles Williams Society*, edited by Geraldine Perriam, 35-40. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2010.

------- and Jayne Thompson, ed. *Naturalism in Theatre: Its Development and Legacy*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Porter, J.R. "George Bell and Religious Drama." In *Proceedings of the 2002 Convention*, edited by Janet E. Hunt and Val Meadowcroft, 26-8. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2003,.

Quash, Ben. *Theology and the Drama of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

------- "Hans Urs von Balthasar's 'Theatre of the World': The Aesthetic of a Dramatics." In *Theological Aesthetics after von Balthasar*, edited by Oleg Bychkov and James Fodor, 19-31. Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008.

Ramsey, Arthur Michael. *From Gore to Temple*. London: Longmans, 1960.

Rees, Geoffrey. "The Anxiety of Inheritance: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Literal Truth of Original Sin." *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 31, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 75–99.

Reynolds, Barbara. "DLS and Integrity." In *Proceedings of the 1987 Seminar*, 2-10. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1988.

------- *The Passionate Intellect*. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1989.

------- *Dorothy L Sayers: Her Life and Soul*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1993.

Roston, Murray. *Biblical Drama in England*. London: Faber and Faber, 1968.

Rubinstein, William D. "A Very British Crime Wave." *History Today*, vol. 60, 12 (December 2010): 43-8.

Siebald, Manfred. "Temptation at Canterbury: T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Dorothy L. Sayers's *The Zeal of Thy House*." *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 10 (Sayers Centenary Issue, 1993): 107-26.

Simmons, Laura K. *Creed without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers.* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005.

Spanos, William V. *The Christian Tradition in Modern Verse Drama: The Poetics of Sacramental Time*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1967.

------- "Charles Williams' *Judgement at Chelmsford*: A Study in the Aesthetic of Sacramental Time." *The Christian Scholar* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1962): 107-17.

Speaight, Robert, *Drama Since 1939*. London: New York: Toronto: published for the British Council by Longmans, Green, 1947.

Sprague, Rosamond Kent. "Sayers' Incarnation of the Incarnation in *The Man Born to be King*." In *Proceedings of the 1997 Seminar*, edited by Christine Simpson, 18-28. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1998.

Staudt, Kathleen Henderson. *At the Turn of a Civilization: David Jones and Modern Poetics*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Stone Dale, Alzina. *Maker and Craftsman: The Story of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.

------- ed. *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Centenary Celebration*. New York: Walker, 1993.

Sturch, Richard. “Common Themes Among Inklings.” In *Charles Williams: a Celebration*, edited by Brian Horne, 153-75. Leominster: Gracewing, Fowler Wright Books, 1995.

Suter, Graham. “Dorothy L. Sayers on the Stage.” In *Studies in Sayers*, edited by Christopher Dean, 68-71. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1994.

Symons, Julian. *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.

The Times. “Play in Lichfield Cathedral.” June 17, 1946, 6.

The Times Literary Supplement. “Miss Sayers’ Modern Faustus.” 17 June, 1939, 353.

------- “The Life of Christ in Drama: Miss Sayers’s Radio Play.” 19 June, 1943, 289.

Thurmer, John. *Reluctant Evangelist: Papers on the Christian Thought of Dorothy L. Sayers*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1996.

------- *A Detection of the Trinity*. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 2008.

------- “Conspiracy of Silence?” in *Proceedings of the 1992 Seminar*, 62-8. Hurstpierpoint: The Dorothy L. Sayers Society, 1992.

Tischler, Nancy. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Pilgrim Soul*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980.

------- “Artist, Artifact and Audience: The Aesthetics and Practice of Dorothy L. Sayers.” In *As Her Whimsey Took Her*, edited by Margaret P. Hannay, 153-164. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1979.

Thompson, Ross. *The Sacraments*. London: SCM Press, 2006.

Turner, Alice K. *The History of Hell*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993.

Twycross, Meg. “Playing ‘The Resurrection’.” In *Medieval Studies for J.A.W. Bennett*, edited by P.L. Heyworth, 273-96. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981.

------- “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Theatre*, 37-84. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J. *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

Warburton, Nick, “Writing Jesus: *Witness*.” *Radius Performing*, vol. VI, no. 141, (Winter 2008): 1-5.

Ward, R.H. “Elements of Religious Drama, Part II.” *Christian Drama* vol. 1, no. 3 (July 1947): 3-9.

Watson, Giles. “Dorothy L. Sayers and the Oecumenical Penguin.” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 14 (1997): 17-32.

Weales, Gerald. *Religion in Modern English Drama*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961.

Webster, Peter. “Archbishop Temple’s offer of a Lambeth degree to Dorothy L. Sayers.” In *From the Reformation to the Permissive Society*, edited by Melanie Barber and Stephen Taylor, with Gabriel Sewell, 565-82. Church of England Record Society, xviii, 2010.

Welch, James. “The Man Born to be King.” *Radio Times*, vol. 73, no. 951 (19 December, 1941): 5.

Willerton, Chris. “Dorothy L. Sayers and the Creative Reader.” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, vol. 28 (2011): 47-60.

Williams, Charles. *The Image of the City and other essays*. Edited by Anne Ridler. Berkeley, CA: The Apocryphile Press, 2007 (1958).

Williams, Harcourt. *Four Years at the Old Vic, 1929-1933*. London: Putnam, 1935.

Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000.

------- *Anglican Identities*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2004.

------- *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love*. London: Continuum Books, 2005.

Wolfe, Kenneth M. *The Churches and the British Broadcasting Corporation 1922-1956*. London: SCM Press, 1984.

Karl Young. *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.

Youngberg, Ruth Tanis. *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Reference Guide*. Boston, Massachusetts: G.K. Hall, 1982.

Theses

Burtis Bradley, S. “Sacramental Elements of Creativity in the Work of Dorothy L. Sayers.” MA dissertation, Wheaton College, 2003.

Clemson, Frances. “The Theology of Dorothy L. Sayers’ Dramatic Works: Dramatic Performance and the ‘continual showing forth of God’s act in history’.” PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2012.

Donahoe, Mary A. “The Sacramental Aesthetic in the Plays of Dorothy L. Sayers.” PhD thesis, University of Oregon, 1992.

Hampel, Michael. “Dorothy L. Sayers: Creative Mind and The Holy Trinity.” MA dissertation, University of Durham, 2002.

Simmons, Laura K. “Theology Made Interesting: Dorothy L. Sayers as a Lay Theologian.” PhD dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1999.

Watson, Giles. “Catholicism in Anglican Culture and Theology: Responses to Crisis in England (1937-1949).” PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1998.

Wells, Bradley M. “Co-inhered Flesh: Incarnational Performance Theology in the Plays of Charles Williams.” PhD thesis, The University of Sydney, 2014.

Wood, Bethany. “Incorporation of the Incarnation: Dorothy L. Sayers’s *The Man Born to be King* and the Wartime BBC.” MA dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 2008.

Online resources

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, www.newadvent.org/summa/

------- *De Veritate* http://dhspriory.org/thomas/QDdeVer27.htm#4

Augustine, *City of God*, http://www.ccel.org

The Lambeth Conference Resolutions Archive from 1930, http://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/127734/1930.pdf

The Old Bailey, www.oldbaileyonline.org

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, http://plato.stanford.edu/

Manuscripts and Archives

Hopkins, Antony. Music for *The Just Vengeance* by Dorothy L. Sayers, 1945. The Dorothy L. Sayers Society Archive, no. 6.128.

Knight, Gerald H. Incidental music to *The Zeal of thy House*, 1938 (1937). British Library Music Collections F.1269.uu.(3.).

Knight, Gerald H. Incidental vocal music to *The Devil to Pay*, 1939. British Library Music Collections F.1267.s.(3.).

Lambeth Palace Library, Dorothy L. Sayers’s correspondence and enclosures to George Bell. Bell Papers, Files 151, 153, 208. In particular, see Dorothy L. Sayers, “Memorandum for the possible formulation of a statement of Oecumenical Doctrine based on the Highest Common Factor of Consent among the Christian Churches,” 1942. London, LPL, MS Bell/208, ff 256-64.

The Religious Drama Society of Great Britain (Radius) Archive, Theatre Museum THM/353 (not yet fully catalogued).

Wheaton College, Marion E. Wade Center, Sayers Archive. In particular, see *The Devil to Pay* correspondence files 1-4 and 1-5.

Film

16 June 1937: Zeal of Thy House by Dorothy L. Sayers. A three-minute newsreel film by Sidney Bligh, accessed by kind permission of the copyright holder Helen Jarrett and with the assistance of Tim Jones, Senior Lecturer at Canterbury Christ Church University.