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ALESSANDRA PETRINA

**“WE’VE HAD QUITE A SHAKESPEAREAN
EVENING, HAVEN’T WE?”:
SHAKESPEARE AND DOROTHY SAYERS**

“Detective stories contain a dream of justice. They project a vision of a world in which wrongs are righted, and villains are betrayed by clues they did not know they were leaving. A world in which murderers are caught and hanged, and innocent victims are avenged, and future murder is deterred”.¹

This idealistic view of crime fiction comes from a curiously hybrid novel, published in 1998 under the joint names of Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957), the celebrated English detective writer, playwright, poet and translator, and Jill Paton Walsh (1937-2020). The latter, when already an established novelist, had received an invitation to complete a book Sayers had left unfinished; and the result is as much a homage to Sayers as a nostalgic tribute to crime writing in the 1920s and 30s, the so-called Golden Age of detective fiction. Such writing is often celebrated in these terms: its reordering of the small world in which the crime is committed

¹ D. L. Sayers and J. Paton Walsh, *Thrones, Dominations. The New Lord Peter Wimsey Novel*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, p. 173.

does not simply entail the identification of the murderer, but also a setting to rights of a number of issues. Misunderstandings, disharmony and the jarring of conflicting impulses are finally resolved in a harmonious stability, which implicitly guarantees future peace.

Within this perspective, Shakespeare occasionally finds a place as a tutelar deity, and his construction of the characters in his plays is taken as a model against which fictional detectives measure their evaluation of the suspects, turning the act of quotation into an assessment and even a providing of clues – sometimes, as has been noticed, with chilling effects.² This is most noticeable in the detective novels of Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982), Sayers' contemporary and another member of the foursome of "Golden Age Queens" which includes also Agatha Christie and Margery Allingham. Marsh, herself an actress and a Shakespeare devotee, often set her plots in the theatrical world; in one famous case, *Light Thickens* (1982), she devoted far more pages and more interest to the rehearsal of a fabulously flawless production of *Macbeth* than to the actual crime and its detection. In her novels, Shakespeare is a reassuring guide, sometimes in a very literal sense: in *A Surfeit of Lampreys* (1941), it is a chance remark by a constable who quotes from *Macbeth* with uncanny accuracy that sets the detective on the right trail. The Jove edition of the novel could therefore write in its blurb that "with a 'sidekick' named Shakespeare, Inspector Alleyn singles out a killer from a glittering array of suspects".³ To the New-Zealand-born Marsh, who would be made Dame of the British Empire for her literary merits, Shakespeare is the pinnacle of all things British to which she turns with loving devotion, from the splendid countryside to the

² S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, in "Shakespeare Quarterly", XLVI, 1995, pp. 424-448.

³ Quoted in M. S. Weinkauff, *Murder Most Poetic: The Mystery Novels of Ngaio Marsh*, San Bernardino, Brownstone Books, 1996, p. 95.

impeccably mannered nobility. Her detective, the aristocratic Inspector Alleyn, never omits to tip his witnesses generously when they happen to belong to the lower classes, while her murderers are often people who have failed to adjust to the rigidly hierarchical class system. It is thus appropriate for Shakespeare, in the form of quotations from the plays that become axioms of unassailable truth, to represent the ultimate court of appeal in the dream of justice that Marsh celebrates; underlying all her novels is a utopia of social order, within which the investigated crime represents only a temporary and deplorable aberration. In this, Marsh is simply developing an attitude that seems common to Golden Age detective writers, to the point that the scholar Susan Baker could posit that "the classic detective story offers an ethical gloss on the logical grounds of Shakespearean critical practice".⁴

In the case of Dorothy Sayers, the relation with Shakespeare is more controversial. Of the four Queens, Sayers was perhaps the one with the greatest literary ambitions; although her most famous work remains the series of crime thrillers (eleven novels and twenty-one short stories) featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, amateur detective, her literary output included a number of religious treatises, poems, plays, and a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* which she considered her best work. In some of her novels, notably *The Documents in the Case* and *Gaudy Night*, she also showed her awareness of contemporary literary debate and of some of the conventions of modernist fiction. This has earned her some critical scorn – in his classic survey of British and American crime fiction, Julian Symons is rather *tranchant* in classifying her books in the category he calls "don's delight", alluding to the purely academic pleasure one might derive from

⁴ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., p. 425.

them;⁵ Q. D. Leavis used her review of two of Sayers's novels to exercise her devastating intellectual snobbery, saying of writers like her that "like the Ouidas and Marie Corellis and Baron Corvos of the past they are really subjects for other kinds of specialist than the literary critic, but unlike those writers these are to some extent undoubtedly conscious of what they are doing"; she also called her work stale, second-hand, hollow, nauseating.⁶ It is, however, important to reflect on Sayers' literary background, not only because it formed the setting of some of her most notable novels (in *Gaudy Night* most of the action takes place within an Oxford women's college bearing striking similarities to Sayers' own Somerville College), but also because it helped her develop, in the course of her writing career, a model of crime writing that moved away from Agatha Christie's mechanical interaction of puppet-like characters and towards a literary ideal.⁷ This effort works both in the direction of character delineation and in the attention to stylistic devices: her careful working of formal details is shown by the way she notes, by means of transliterations, not only the vagaries of lower-class speech (a conventional comic trait of much detective fiction at the time), but also the sloppy pronunciation of the aristocracy.⁸

⁵ J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, New York, The Mysterious Press, 1992², p. 133.

⁶ Q. D. Leavis, *The Case of Miss Dorothy Sayers*, in "Scrutiny", 1937, pp. 334-340.

⁷ On this point, Michael Holquist notes that, in common with a number of contemporary detective writers, in the latter part of her career Sayers "sought to write novels not detective novels as such" (M. Holquist, *Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction*, in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction: A New Comparative Approach*, edited by M. Ascari, Bologna, Cotepra, 2000, p. 167). In this, Holquist is echoing Sayers herself, who in an essay shortly following her publication of *Gaudy Night* declared that she had meant to write something "less like a conventional detective story and more like a novel" (quoted in L. Young, *Dorothy L. Sayers and the New Woman Detective Novel*, in "Clues. A Journal of Detection", XXIII, 2005, p. 39).

⁸ M. McGlynn, *Parma Violets and Pince-Nez: Dorothy Sayers's Meritocracy*, in "Clues. A Journal of Detection", XXXVII, 2019, pp. 71-82.

Sayers' detective fiction is dominated by Lord Peter Wimsey, the amateur detective who is also an elegant man-about-town in interwar London, a connoisseur of fine wines and of early printed books, and a quasi-professional pianist who says things like, "I feel rather like the Italian Concerto this evening. It's better on the harpsichord, but I haven't got one here. I find Bach good for the brain".⁹ For this character, at least in the early stages of his development, culture is fodder for his frivolous snobbishness. It is also, of course, a marker of class and wealth. At the same time, this effete aristocrat is, as proudly noted in a fictional page of Debrett's Peerage, the author of two monographs, "Notes on the Collecting of Incunabula" and "The Murderer's Vade-Mecum" (winking slyly at Sherlock Holmes' numerous monographs upon the tracing of footsteps and suchlike). He is also an alumnus of Eton and Oxford; in the latter institution he concluded his academic career with first class honours in the School of Modern History, an adequate introduction to his work in the Foreign Office. Wimsey is equally contrasted to fellow aristocrats who waste their money at cards or on drugs, and with members of the lower classes whose intellectual efforts, even when well meant, lack the suavity and nonchalance of the man for whom culture is a way of life. Rather improbably, his closest friend and future brother-in-law is an earnest policeman, Charles Parker, who in his spare time reads the Church Fathers, with a predilection for Origen: if a dedicated middle-class policeman may read for moral improvement, Wimsey can afford to read for purely aesthetic pleasure. Some of his literary references could also allude to Sayers' academic training, yet turn out to be disappointingly obscure: it is difficult to imagine what the contemporary reading public would have made of a Wimsey who, in *Whose Body?*, rushes to an auction to acquire a

⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, p. 124.

copy of the Caxton folio of *The Four Sons of Aymon* – thoughtfully adding, “It’s the 1489 folio and unique”.¹⁰ A love for incunabula might be fascinating for book historians, but risks alienating the general reader.

Such a reader would be far more struck by Wimsey’s love of good food and wine, and by his occasionally inane witticisms. In the early novels Lord Peter Wimsey, especially in his relationship with his manservant Bunter, suggests a closeness not to the grand masters of modernism but to a contemporary, no less famous character, and a champion of fatuousness: Bertie Wooster. The influence of P. G. Wodehouse’s supremely comic creation was not overlooked by Julian Symons, who tartly observed that “Wimsey is Bertie Wooster endowed with intelligence but still ridiculous”.¹¹ Sayers herself sensed that the relationship between Wimsey and his manservant Bunter could be read as a version of the relationship between Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, and hinted at it. In *Strong Poison*, the novel that marks a decided shift from this early mode, Wimsey shows some restlessness at his manservant’s urbane omniscience, and when the master asks his valet to check for a further clue in the mystery, the following exchange ensues:

“Pardon me, my lord, the possibility had already presented itself to my mind”.
 “It had?”
 “Yes, my lord.”
 “Do you never overlook anything, Bunter?”
 “I endeavour to give satisfaction, my lord.”
 “Well, then, don’t talk like Jeeves. It irritates me”.¹²

¹⁰ D. L. Sayers, *Whose Body?*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1968, p. 12. This reference is followed by a lengthy authorial footnote in which the rarity of this and other early editions is fully explained.

¹¹ J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, cit., p. 158.

¹² D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 204.

The influence of Wodehouse on the early Wimsey novels is especially noticeable in the treatment of Shakespearean quotations. In the Wooster-and-Jeeves books, Shakespeare is the stuff of public-school-boys' nightmares, a farrago of imperfectly remembered phrases that lend authority to any utterance, irrespective of their actual sense; their being set in contexts of supreme irrelevance acts as an interrogation of the very authority they embody. Wodehouse's parody of authority consists in pushing the irrelevance to its extreme limit; if we consider the concept of *casual quotation*, defined as the occurrence in which the act of quotation is foregrounded at the expense of intertextual meaning,¹³ we may find instances such as the following, in which Shakespeare is jumbled with Victorian half-forgotten lines and schoolboy's lore:

"Beneath the thingummies of what-d'you-call-it, his head, wind and weather permitting, is as a rule bloody but unbowed, and if the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune want to crush his proud spirit, they have to pull their socks up and make a special effort".¹⁴

This passage is taken from a Wodehouse novel first published in 1954. A striking anticipation of this mode of quoting is present in *Strong Poison*, the first of Sayers' novels in which quotations begin to take a metaliterary role. Here, the reference to Shakespeare cloaks Wimsey's

¹³ R. Hohl Trillini, *Casual Shakespeare. Three Centuries of Verbal Echoes*, New York, Routledge, 2018, p. 1: "Casual quotations often obscure the identity of the quoted text and reduce its impact by modifications of the original wording and by cross-quoting other sources in the immediate vicinity".

¹⁴ P. G. Wodehouse, *Jeeves and the Feudal Spirit*, New York, Scribner, 2000, p. 219. The observations on Wodehouse (and the choice of the quotation) are indebted to D. Pollack-Pelzner, *Quoting Shakespeare in the British Novel*, in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, edited by J. Maxwell and K. Rumbold, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 136-155. In Pollack-Pelzner's felicitous definition, in the Wooster novels Shakespeare reverts to his Victorian function: "the embodiment of wisdom, captured in iterable phrases" (p. 150).

delicate reticence on the subject of the death of a very old and a very rich woman:

“If he had any expectation from Mrs Wrayburn, and the old girl – I mean, the poor old lady – was so near shuffling off this mortal thingummy, why, then, don’t you know, he would have waited, or raised the wind on the strength of a post-obit or something or the other”.¹⁵

Strong Poison is also notable in that it marks the appearance of the love interest, a character who progressively takes centre-stage and has noteworthy autobiographical traits. A closer look at this character allows us to see how Sayers uses Shakespearean quotations also to further a reflection on the relationship between the sexes. When first we see Harriet Vane, she is on trial, accused of having murdered the man she lived with and refused to marry; a crime writer of some success, Vane is also an Oxford graduate (Sayers herself was among the first women in England to receive a university degree, in 1920). After she is triumphantly acquitted at the end of the book, Vane goes on to share the limelight with Wimsey in three further novels, *Have his Carcase* (1932), *Gaudy Night* (1936) and *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937), as well as in shorter writings. Wimsey and Vane’s relationship, based on conflict and intellectual antagonism, highlights the issue of the educated woman and her role in society between the two Wars, and shines into detective fiction some light of realism through the urgency of its debate.

The woman question had in fact informed Sayers’ early novels as well, and the writer had attempted different forms of poetic justice, even if in a more frivolous vein. In *Unnatural Death* (1927), a novel written before Vane’s appearance, the writer had introduced Miss Alexandra Katherine Climpson, a middle-aged spinster who quietly and efficiently ran an

¹⁵ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit. p. 102.

investigating bureau employing only unmarried women. The chapter introducing Climpson is in fact sarcastically titled "A Use for Spinters", and adorned with an epigraph taken from the right-wing novelist Gilbert Frankau: "There are two million more females than males in England and Wales: And this is an awe-inspiring circumstance".¹⁶ In this investigating bureau, unmarried women with no perspective in the world can have a job and some form of safety, and in this novel, as well as in *Strong Poison*, Miss Climpson's role is central to the solution of the mystery and to the identification of the culprit. However, established authority maintains its role: although run by and employing only women, the detective bureau is subsidised by Wimsey, who uses it as a sort of private warehouse, where he can pick and choose the ideal helpers for his cases. The role of Climpson and her associates is explained by Wimsey in mockingly self-conscious tones:

"Miss Climpson," said Lord Peter, "is a manifestation of the wasteful way in which this country is run. Look at electricity. Look at water-power. Look at the tides. Look at the sun. Millions of power units being given off into space every minute. Thousands of old maids, simply bursting with useful energy, forced by our stupid social system into hydros and hotels and communities and hostels and posts as companions, where their magnificent gossip-powers and units of inquisitiveness are allowed to dissipate themselves or even become harmful to the community, while the ratepayers' money is spent on getting work for which these women are providentially fitted, inefficiently carried out by ill-equipped policemen like you. My god! it's enough to make a man write to *John Bull*. And then bright young men write nasty little patronising books called "Elderly Women," and "On the Edge of the Explosion" – and the drunkards make songs upon 'em, poor things".¹⁷

While conscious of the feminist question, the passage evades any serious discussion, and the women belonging to the detective bureau all fall into the stereotype of the elderly, useful, fundamentally sympathetic

¹⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Unnatural Death*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1977, p. 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

secretary, secretly in love with her male employer. In the case of Wimsey's relationship with Harriet Vane, instead, the writer is striving to find a different intellectual and emotional premise. *Busman's Honeymoon*, which sees Wimsey's and Vane's relationship culminate with their marriage, proposes another, more conventional happy ending to the woman question: the New Woman finds a man who miraculously both loves her and respects her intellect, and the two establish "the marriage of true minds".

In spite of their vastly different social class and wealth, Wimsey and Vane are shown to share a level playing field on the basis of their academic achievement. The novels that charter their relationship see their antagonism gradually develop into partnership not simply on the basis of love, but also of a common intellectual terrain. The shorthand for this intellectual bond is their shared love of quotations: as Wimsey tells Vane in one of their first meetings, "And if you can quote *Kai Lung*, we should certainly get on together".¹⁸ Vane is also the only other character who can twist and adapt a Shakespearean quotation, and use it, Wodehouse-like, with irreverent nonchalance, even while she is in prison, threatened by execution: "You've got a family and traditions, you know. Caesar's wife and that sort of things".¹⁹ The four Wimsey-Vane novels offer a development in the use of literary quotations that mirrors the development of the novels themselves, and becomes the backbone on which Sayers builds her effort to turn her crime thrillers into 'serious' literature. *Gaudy Night*, the third novel of the series and the one most directly involved with the feminist question, has been often discussed as belonging to the New Woman literary movement, one of the very few novels written by a woman in which "a female protagonist's negotiation of gender is of equal importance and often bound

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 44. The reference is to Ernest Bramah's *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* (1922).

¹⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 210.

up with the mystery".²⁰ In spite of this commitment, the writer cannot renounce some of her academic affectation: the mystery here revolves around a quotation from Virgil (*Aeneid* III.280-284, the passage describing the harpies appearing at Aeneas' table) which is offered in Latin but not translated: after all, Wimsey observes, it is the kind of passage "to which any school child might easily have access".²¹

In *Gaudy Night* Wimsey and Vane, both Oxford educated, often use poetry, playing a never-ending and occasionally obscure quotation game, as a weapon in their amorous rivalry – and so does the narrator, inserting literary epigraphs at the beginning of the chapters that require more than casual attention. Early modern English literature has pride of place: though the range is fairly wide, the writer generally offers an alternative to the literary status quo by proposing quotations not so much from Shakespeare (although the playwright does appear occasionally), but from minor Jacobean dramatists and metaphysical poets, from Michael Drayton to Robert Herrick; these poets at the time were being re-discovered by the London literary intelligentsia thanks to T. S. Eliot's celebrated essays, and by the more general reader thanks to the shift in the school and university curricula.²² In a novel in which literature holds centre stage, being the main occupation of its female protagonist and one of the keys to the detective mystery, and in which the courtship between Wimsey and Vane at one point takes the convoluted form of a Petrarchan sonnet written in tandem, the tutelary deity appears to be John Donne, who is also given pride of place in the epigraph opening the volume.

²⁰ L. Young, *Dorothy L. Sayers and the New Woman Detective Novel*, cit., p. 42.

²¹ D. L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1970, p. 418.

²² J. Gorak, *From Prodigality to Economy: T. S. Eliot on the "Minor Elizabethans"*, in "The Modern Language Review", CVIII, 2013, pp. 1064-1085.

At the end of *Gaudy Night*, Wimsey proposes (yet again) to Vane and is finally accepted. The compromise between intellectual independence and heterosexual love is achieved by having Wimsey acknowledge the intellectual equality of the woman, a move symbolised by the form his last, and finally successful, bid for marriage takes. On Magdalen Bridge, with the two protagonists in cap and gown, the little exchange is phrased in (once more untranslated) Latin:

“With a gesture of submission he bared his head and stood gravely, the square cap dangling in his hand.

‘*Placetne, magistra?*’

‘*Placet.*’²³

The use of the word *magistra* underlines Vane’s role as a scholar: Oxford, which preceded Cambridge by twenty-eight years in the decision of conferring degrees upon women, can provide the equality between the sexes that society at large still withdraws. In narrative terms, Sayers marks her choice by having Wimsey as the successful sleuth, but Vane as the character whose point of view is highlighted throughout by way of interior monologue;²⁴ a choice that will be made also in the case of *Busman’s Honeymoon*.

As we have seen, literary quotation is a game Sayers brings to new and sometimes arcane heights. Even the titles of the novels in which Wimsey and Vane appear are allusions to former literary works, and in this case Shakespeare begins to make a more authoritative appearance: if in the case of *Strong Poison* the title is simply a vague echo from *2 Henry VI*, which might, if recognised, mislead the reader as to the vital clue of the

²³ D. L. Sayers, *Gaudy Night*, cit., p. 440.

²⁴ On this point see J. Armstrong, *The Strange Case of Harriet Vane: Dorothy L. Sayers Anticipating Poststructuralism in the 1930s*, in “Clues. A Journal of Detection”, XXXIII, 2015, pp. 112-122, especially pp. 117-118.

mystery ("Give me some drink, and bid the apothecary / Bring the strong poison that I bought of him", III, 3, 17-18),²⁵ the subsequent novel, *Have his Carcase*, alludes to the famous mispronouncing of the legal phrase *habeas corpus* on the part of Sam Weller in Dickens's *The Pickwick Papers*. In the case of *Gaudy Night*, the expression, which refers to an Oxford College celebration, appears in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, when Anthony casts his lot with the Egyptian queen once and for all and calls, "Come, / Let's have one other gaudy night" (III, 13, 184-185).

This double allusion contained in the quotation resurfaces in the last title of our series. *Busman's Honeymoon* appears simply to play with a homely phrase, "busman's holiday", but in fact hides a complicated net of references. In a previous novel, *Strong Poison*, Wimsey, already in love with Vane and fearing to be unable to save her from the gallows, is discovered by his sister in a glum mood during the Christmas holiday. Asked about his state, he says: "Too much plum-pudding [...] and too much country. I'm a martyr, that's what I am – burning in brandy to make a family holiday".²⁶ The last phrase, in its turn, plays on a line from Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, "Butcher'd to make a Roman holiday".²⁷ In *Busman's Honeymoon* all these references interlock when Wimsey, after the 'butchered' body of the victim has been discovered in their honeymoon house, asks the 'real' detective of the story, Superintendent Kirk, whether he and his wife should go away and leave the police to do their job:

²⁵ All quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, edited by G. Blakemore Evans, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1974.

²⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Strong Poison*, cit., p. 119.

²⁷ Canto IV, stanza 141. The edition used is *Byron. Poetical Works*, edited by F. Page and J. Jump, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1970.

“That’s as you like, my lord. I’d be glad enough if you’d stay; you might give me a bit of help, seeing as you know the ropes, so to speak. Not but what it’ll be a kind of busman’s holiday for you,’ he finished up, rather dubiously.

‘That’s what I was thinking,’ said Harriet. ‘A busman’s honeymoon. Butchered to make a—’

‘Lord Byron!’ cried Mr. Kirk, a little too promptly. ‘Butchered to make a busman’s—no, that don’t seem right somehow.’

‘Try Roman,’ said Peter. ‘All right, we’ll do our best’”²⁸

This little exchange introduces a variation of the quotation game, which for the first time involves, beside Wimsey and Vane, also a policeman. As in the case of the already mentioned Charles Parker, policemen, however worthy, are normally not sophisticated enough to participate in the game. Rather, inadequate policemen, like Inspector Umpelty in *Have his Carcase*, would try to participate in it with disastrous result, attributing the Congrevian phrase “no fury like a woman scorned” to the Bible.²⁹ Kirk is allowed in: his entrance modifies the game, and by implication the role of the authorities who are being quoted. Rather than being little asides for the cognoscenti, quotations are now patient steps to self-improvement.

The change in tactics in the choice of the title appears indicative of the strategy Sayers adopts for this last novel, and it may also be due to the singular genesis of this work, whose subtitle is, revealingly, *A Love Story with Detective Interruptions*. *Busman’s Honeymoon* first saw the light as a play; written in collaboration with Muriel St. Clare Byrne, it premiered at the Comedy Theatre in London in 1936. As such, it was obviously capitalising on the success of the Peter Wimsey novels; there is evidence

²⁸ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon. A Love Story with Detective Interruptions*, London, Gollancz, 1937, pp. 164-165.

²⁹ M. McGlynn, *Parma Violets and Pince-Nez: Dorothy Sayers’s Meritocracy*, cit., p. 76.

that Byrne "suggested and encouraged" the composition of the play,³⁰ and in any case a piece written for performance would need to reduce quotations to a minimum. Sayers then worked at the transformation of the play into a novel while the two friends were waiting for a producer, and it is possible that the consciousness that the novel would be a derivative product, and be deprived of its novelty value as a whodunnit, allowed the writer to experiment with a different construction. Almost luxuriating in the freedom the space of the novel would give her, Sayers built a system of frames around her story: on the one hand, she added a Prothalamion and an Epithalamion, partly to highlight the celebration of the marriage that underlies the story, partly to re-connect it with Elizabethan literature (though interestingly there is no mention of Edmund Spenser: the epithalamion that is invoked is John Donne's *Epithalamion of the Lady Elizabeth and the Count Palatine*). On the other hand, as happens in some (not all) of the other Wimsey novels, she constructed a complex system of epigraphs, inserting one for each chapter. As usual, in these cases Sayers draws mostly from early modern literature; but while in the earlier novels she showed a marked preference for minor Jacobean writers, in this volume pride of place is given to Shakespeare, who is the author of the main epigraph set at the beginning of the volume, as well as of a number of epigraphs to individual chapters. Shakespearean epigraphs are a staple of nineteenth-century literature, and here, too, the playwright performs the function of "affable familiar ghost".³¹ This is shown already in the opening quotation, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

³⁰ C. Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 57.

³¹ The quotation (from Shakespeare's Sonnet 86) and the analysis of epigraphs in nineteenth-century writing derive from F. Ritchie and R. S. White, *Shakespeare Quotation in the Romantic Age*, in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, edited by J. Maxwell and K. Rumbold, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 134-135.

“That will ask some tears in the true performing of it: if I do it, let the audience look to their eyes; I will move storms, I will condole in some measure...I could play Eracles rarely, or a part to tear a cat in, to make all split... a lover is more condoling”.³²

The passage is originally part of Bottom’s self-presentation when the mechanics starts their rehearsals in the Athenian wood. Set before the dedication (which includes Muriel St. Clare Byrne among the dedicatees), it re-proposes the connection with the play from which the novel derives, and at the same time invites the reader to maintain the spirit of detachment Theseus and his court possess during the mechanics’ entertainment in Shakespeare’s comedy. Subsequent Shakespearean epigraphs provide useful pointers, such as the quotation about the “chimney in my father’s house” (*2 Henry VI*, IV, 2, 149) that we find at the beginning of chapter 4. This quotation, referring to the Jack Cade scene in the original, introduces not only the chimney motif that will be central to the murder, but also the role the working class will play in this mystery. It thus calls the reader’s attention to the new importance that this novel, where Wimsey and Vane fully re-discover their rural roots, attributes to characters hitherto confined to the stereotype of the country rustic. The quotation introduces a theme that will become extremely important in the novel, and that can be exemplified in this passage:

“In London, anybody, at any moment, might do or become anything. But in a village – no matter what village – they were all immutably themselves; parson, organist, sweep, duke’s son and doctor’s daughter, moving like chessmen upon their allotted squares. She was curiously excited. She thought, ‘I have married England’”.³³

³² D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., p. 5. I have transcribed the quotation as it appears in the novel; the dots correspond to sections Sayers omitted.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-116.

England identifies with Shakespeare, and the epithalamion celebrates the reconciliation of its inner contradictions.³⁴ The development of the novel from the play might also have influenced its prevailing mode, realising what Susan Rowland calls "the shift from parody to pastoral".³⁵ The Shakespearean quotations, insisting on the worth of rural England through its supreme representative, give authority to this shift. Unsurprisingly, one of the non-Shakespearean epigraphs, in chapter 8, comes from an early modern play that may be considered the epitome of Englishness, *Arden of Faversham*.

Aside from epigraphs, quotations run through the novel in a manner that is reminiscent of the quotation game played by Wimsey and Vane in earlier works. However, their function, and the way in which they are proposed, is radically different, and suits the new mode. Such a change is made clear by Kirk himself, as he prepares to interrogate Wimsey with the help of his constable, Joe Sellon:

"So," said Peter, "Galahad will sit down in Merlin's seat."

Mr. Kirk, on the point of lowering his solid fifteen stone into the chair, jerked up abruptly.

"Alfred," said he, "Lord Tennyson."

"Got it in one," said Peter, mildly surprised. A glow of enthusiasm shone softly in the policeman's ox-like eyes. "You're a bit of a student, aren't you, Superintendent?"

"I like to do a bit o' reading in my off-duty," admitted Mr. Kirk, bashfully. "It mellows the mind." He sat down. "I often think as the rowtine of police dooty may tend to narrow a man and make him a bit hard, if you take my meaning. When I find that happening, I say to myself, what you need, Sam Kirk, is contact with a Great Mind or so, after supper. Reading maketh a full man —"

³⁴ S. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell. British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2001, p. 75. Note also what Lisa Hopkins writes of Edmund Crispin's *Love Lies Bleeding* (1948): "Crispin's cosy Middle England, where almost all the characters are engaged in education of one sort or another and in which a boys' and a girls' school are collaborating to stage *Henry V*, is a culture in which Shakespeare's place is utterly secure" (L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 151).

³⁵ S. Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell. British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 74.

‘Conference a ready man,’ said Harriet.

‘And writing an exact man,’ said the Superintendent. ‘Mind that, Joe Sellon, and see you let me have them notes so as they can be read to make sense.’

‘Francis Bacon,’ said Peter, a trifle belatedly. ‘Mr. Kirk, you’re a man after my own heart’³⁶.

In this passage, which blithely equates Alfred Tennyson and Francis Bacon and gives them the same authority, the new rules of the game are established: quotations can only come from the most canonical and recognizable writers, since it would be cruelly snobbish to taunt Kirk with quotations from Michael Drayton or Robert Burton; each quotation is carefully traced back to its author; and their purpose is either to offer actual help towards solving the murder, or to “mellow the mind”, which means improving it, giving it a moral compass, recalling it back from the narrowness of the present investigation and elevating it. The novel appears to suggest that the practice of quotation, far from providing a moment of aesthetic pleasure, should rather become a discipline, a spiritual exercise. The impression is reinforced by the reiterated appeals on the part of Kirk to his constable that he should make a note of a particularly apt quotation: Kirk is thus passing on to this subordinate the useful lesson, in a didactic process that mirrors what the novelist is proposing to its readers.

In this new order, John Donne, beloved of Peter Wimsey in the previous novel, must also find a new place. There are two important quotations from Donne: one is the already mentioned epigraph taken from the *Epithalamion of the Lady Elizabeth and the Count Palatine*; the other serves as a conclusion to the novel, and is taken from *Eclogue for the Marriage of the Earl of Somerset*. In both cases, we abandon the metaphysical poet and approach Donne as a figure of the establishment, a court poet and divine conferring his benediction on the unions of the great.

³⁶ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., pp. 153-154.

Donne makes another, unexpected appearance at the beginning of the novel: part of the preparations for the wedding consists in finding a suitable gift for the bride on the part of the bridegroom and viceversa. While Wimsey gives Vane a quill originally belonging to Sheridan Le Fanu (Vane's, and Sayers', avowed model among detective writers), Vane gives Wimsey a seventeenth century autograph manuscript. As described by Wimsey's mother, it is "a very beautiful letter from D. to a parishioner – Lady Somebody – about Divine and human love".³⁷ The artefact evokes the poet beloved of Wimsey while once again confining Donne to the more acceptable role of priestly advisor, rather than of erotic poet or apologist for suicide. Besides, the letter alludes to the conventions of crime fiction, since it may be read as a parodic allusion to a device occasionally to be found in Golden Age detective stories of the "don's delight" kind which feature a "material Shakespeare", normally a relic in the form of a Shakespeare manuscript.³⁸ While in those cases the relic is essential to the detective story, and very often the ultimate reason for the murder, the John Donne letter is incidental to *Busman's Honeymoon*, and rather points at the nature of the sentimental relationship between Wimsey and Vane. Besides, its monetary value is great, but not such as to be compared with the Shakespearean relics that haunt other detective novels. Harriet Vane can buy it at an auction, with the proceedings of her own published short stories: as she specifies, "three five-thousand-word shorts at forty guineas each for the *Thrill Magazine*".³⁹ While popular entertainment ("where did you get hold of that exceedingly low-class rag?")⁴⁰ finances delicate

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

³⁸ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., p. 429. See also L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 149-179.

³⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, cit., p. 297.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 297.

aesthetic enjoyment, writerly authority becomes commodified in a market in which literature has its place, both among the goods and the currency. Sayers thus demythologises the idea of the authoritative writer of the past as either a creator who stands outside the system of market exchange or a provider of priceless relics – both tags, inevitably, associated with Shakespeare. Besides, the literary relic does not prompt speculation or debate, as is often the case in the genre tradition: rather, it is a given, a token of unassailable truth.

The episode, while reiterating the value of literature for the two protagonists, introduces a recurring theme in the novel: literary authority and its association with detective ability. In the detective stories that conventionally and lavishly make use of Shakespearean quotations, these are often the clue to the crime, or to the identity of the culprit – the quotation game is one the detective needs to win in order to complete his (or sometimes her) job.⁴¹ In this novel, the strategic placing of the literary allusions suggests also something different. Sayers is aware of treading a delicate path between two conventions – on the one hand, Shakespeare as the detective's sidekick, the oracle providing useful *sortes* to solve the murder, in the best Ngaio Marsh tradition; on the other, Wodehouse's happy misuse of Shakespeare as a familiar and slightly comic house deity: "It's like Shakespeare. Sounds well, but doesn't mean anything".⁴² Sayers chooses a different road: literary quotations in her novels are used to provide an extra layer of meaning, "to underscore the issue of interpretation".⁴³ Shakespeare is used to make us reflect on what we are reading, on the fact that even crime fiction can have an underlying moral

⁴¹ S. Baker, *Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story*, cit., pp. 437-438.

⁴² P. G. Wodehouse, *Joy in the Morning*, London, Penguin, 1999, p. 136.

⁴³ C. Downing, *Writing Performances: The Stages of Dorothy L. Sayers*, cit., p. 58.

message. In order to achieve this, the novelist firmly highlights the fundamental role of education – a theme that had already been glanced at in *Gaudy Night*, and that here becomes predominant. If Oxford was the pinnacle of academic training and achievement, those privileged enough to benefit of its atmosphere have then a duty towards society at large, and especially towards the epitome of English society as exemplified in the country village. In this respect, rather than the serious and lovable but fundamentally individualistic Charles Parker, what is required is a figure of authority embodying also the voice of the community: wise, sagacious and stolid Superintendent Kirk, who turns Shakespeare into a familiar companion for convivial meetings (as Wimsey says at the end of one such meeting, “we’ve had quite a Shakespearean evening, haven’t we?”).⁴⁴ Kirk uses Shakespeare as an infallible compass in the detection not so much of crime, but of the principle of right and wrong. If it is true, as noted above, that detective stories contain a dream of justice, such a dream seems to be spelled out for the little-educated in terms of Shakespearean quotations. The novel charts this progress quite clearly, as we go from an early allusion, in which Wimsey’s mother defers to Shakespeare’s authority while noting in her diary a conversation she had with her prospective daughter-in-law:

“Said to her, ‘Well, my dear, tell Peter what you feel, but do remember he’s just as vain and foolish as most men and not a chameleon to smell any sweeter for being trodden on.’ On consideration, think I meant ‘camomile’ (Shakespeare? Must ask Peter)”⁴⁵.

to the end of the novel, when Wimsey and Vane have come to a full understanding of the meaning of their union and can now discard the

⁴⁴ D. L. Sayers, *Busman’s Honeymoon*, cit., p. 360.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

Shakespearean authority, leaving it in the hands of the less educated: “We can’t possess one another. We can only give and hazard all we have – Shakespeare, as Kirk would say...”⁴⁶

The use of quotations goes beyond the allocation of cultural capital for social ranking, and offers the reader a wider perspective on the themes discussed in the novel. Shakespeare performs a metaliterary function, alerting the reader to what is going to happen before the characters are aware of it: arriving at their honeymoon house, Wimsey and Vane find it dark, and apparently uninhabited, since the former owner, who should be there to welcome them, does not answer their summons. Their servant, who has used the door knocker in vain, is invited to try again at the back door: “Wake Duncan with thy knocking”, Wimsey calls out blithely.⁴⁷ Inevitably, the man is in fact lying in the cellar, murdered. Anagnorisis is performed by means of the supremely authoritative medium, William Shakespeare. Thereafter, the allusions to *Macbeth* throughout the book serve as a reminder that the murder mystery may be connected with issues of family and inheritance.⁴⁸ By the same token, the numerous references to *Hamlet* highlight not only the melancholy, introspective nature of the main character, but also the possibility that the English idyll outlined in the novel may be ephemeral, as Kirk begins to understand when he realises that his sergeant was blackmailed by the murdered victim:

“I wouldn’t have believed it.’

‘There are more things in heaven and earth,’ said Peter, with a kind of melancholy amusement.

‘That’s so, my lord. There’s a lot of truth in *Hamlet*.’

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ L. Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction: DCI Shakespeare*, cit., pp. 28-29.

'Hamlet?' Peter's bark of harsh laughter astonished the Superintendent. 'By God, you're right. Village or hamlet of this merry land. Stir up the mud of the village pond and the stink will surprise you'".⁴⁹

Perhaps most offensive for modern sensibilities is the quotation from *Twelfth Night* justifying the inherent disapproval of a woman who has had the temerity of falling in love with a younger man:

"'Twelfth Night!' cried Mr. Kirk, exultantly. 'Orsino, that's it! "Too old, by heaven, Let still the woman take An elder than herself" – I knew there was something in Shakespeare'".⁵⁰

As can be seen, on most of these cases Kirk is called upon to clarify the reference for the reader, indicating the exact source of the quotation, and to bring its truth resoundingly home. The Shakesperean allusion takes a multifarious role in the novel: it indicates the search for a more popular audience; it is proposed as an indisputable authority; it asserts the never-wavering rightfulness of the detective, only occasionally hinting at self-righteousness.

An especially controversial passage occurs at the end of the novel. Having detected and helped convict the murderer, Peter Wimsey must now face the fact that he has indirectly condemned a man to death. Frantically pacing the chamber on the eve of the execution, he appeals to his attentive wife:

"'My gracious silence – who called his wife that?'
'Coriolanus.'
'Another tormented devil ... I'm grateful, Harriet – No, that's not right; you're not being kind, you're being yourself'".⁵¹

⁴⁹ D. L. Sayers, *Busman's Honeymoon*, cit., p. 206. The HyperHamlet database identifies no less than eight allusions to the play in *Busman's Honeymoon* (<http://www.hyperhamlet.unibas.ch/index.php/hyperhamlet/hh2>).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

We are struck by the condescending tones of an exchange in which the wife has the role of sympathetic listener, ministering to the husband's neurosis, or, at best, supplying literary references. But there is another level at which the passage can be interrogated: Coriolanus may be truly said to be the least sympathetic character in Shakespeare, a bloodthirsty proto-Fascist. For somebody like Wimsey, who has evoked analogies with Hamlet throughout the novel, the shift is startling. In this sense, the allusion takes sinister overtones. There is evidence, throughout the Wimsey novels, that capital punishment was an object of debate in Sayers' mind, as it infringed the fundamental liberty of the human being to sin. In the case of other Golden Age novelists, the issue is more clearly established – Agatha Christie has her Miss Marple decidedly in favour of it, while Ngaio Marsh's Inspector Alleyn is equally decidedly against. Sayers does not face the matter directly, but lets her aristocratic, fastidious, sensitive detective react to the capital punishment he has caused with a manifestation of the symptoms of shell shock he suffered from in the early novels. The Shakespearean allusion prompts the remembrance of the debate between right and might, a debate Coriolanus fails disastrously.⁵²

Rather than an immovable pillar of wisdom, Shakespeare is here the measure of all debates, the gauge against which different characters, according to their different sensibilities, assess their knowledge, their reactions, their emotions, their ethical stances; the reader is invited to join in what is no longer a parlour game, but rather a spiritual exercise. Such an attitude singles out Sayers from the convention of the genre and sets up a

⁵² S. Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800-2000. Detection, Death, Diversity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 88: "Sayers is rare in making her detective in *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) recognise with some pain that in identifying a murderer he too has sent someone to his death".

model later writers imitated. In its opening section, this article alluded to Jill Paton Walsh, the author of some successful *pastiches* of the Wimsey-Vane brand. Paton Walsh also wrote a number of detective novels set in contemporary Cambridge. In one of them, centred on the so-called Bad Quarto of *Hamlet*, there is even a latter-day scholar challenging the centrality of the Bard:

"The idea that there was any particular merit in the works of Shakespeare, was, according to the prevailing school of thought, an artificial creation, put up by British imperialists, white supremacists and male chauvinists, because it privileged the culture of the 'master-race' over all others, and underpinned the imperialist agenda. If Shakespeare was the greatest writer of all time, then he could justify the forced teaching of English all over the empire, and by implication the subordination of authentic native cultures everywhere. Since Shakespeare was a man, and feminist orthodoxy ordained that no man could understand a woman or represent any female character truthfully and fairly, it followed that the worship of Shakespeare was also part of a conspiracy to justify the marginalisation of women and the rejection of women writers from the canon of English studies. The word 'bardolatry' was liberally sprinkled throughout such expressions of opinion".⁵³

The academic who spouts these notions is found dead in a small alley, having fallen from a great height. Shakesporean intertextuality brings its own dream of justice.

⁵³ J. Paton Walsh, *The Bad Quarto. An Imogen Quy Mystery*, London, Hodder and Stoughton, 2007, p. 150.

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