The Passionate Intellect

Dante and the Leopard

Lino-cut by D.L.S.

The Passionate Intellect

Dorothy L. Sayers' Encounter with Dante

by Barbara Reynolds

with a Foreword by Ralph E. Hone

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FOREWORD

It was a pronounced providence that drew together Dorothy L. Sayers, recently embarked on the translation of Dante, and Barbara Reynolds, then lecturer in Italian at the University of Cambridge. In the following pages we are introduced to many of the episodes by which the close acquaintance begun in August 1946 steadily progressed into an enduring and reciprocally rewarding friendship.

Barbara Reynolds noted from the beginning that Dorothy Sayers' work was a catalyst, "revitalizing" responses to Dante in England. No doubt the fame of the detective novelist, dramatist, radio broadcaster, poet and critical essayist drew some readers out of curiosity to the Sayers Dante translations. But the number of Penguin reprintings alone indicates that Sayers' grasp of Dante gratified millions of readers not only in England but also throughout the entire English-speaking world.

Dorothy L. Sayers on her own nourished the friendship with Barbara Reynolds over the years by accepting additional invitations to address sessions of the summer school held by the Society for Italian Studies at various English university centers; by requesting a preface to her *Introductory Papers on Dante;* by voluminous correspondence full of trial translations of Dante with pointed comments on verse translation itself; and by varied purely social occasions. With auspicious foresight Sayers had prepared her friend to finish the work she had only partly completed on the *Paradiso* by the time of her death in December 1957.

The friendship did not prosper out of sheer cordiality, although there was an abundance of that. Sayers recognized the staunch scholar in Dr. Reynolds, and the scholar became a compatible resource. We need to remember that Barbara Reynolds, after completing the translation of the *Paradiso,* was to become the translator of Dante's *La Vita Nuova,* the translator of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso,* and, after forty years' labor, the general editor of the *Cambridge Italian Dictionary.* She also has had an illustrious academic career in England and abroad.

The Sayers friendship constituted a legacy to Barbara Reynolds. She has lectured widely on Sayers. She has befriended any number of researchers studying the life and writings of Sayers. She has been the managing editor of *Seven,* which includes a focus on Sayers, since its inception. She is chairman of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society. And now she offers us a book on Sayers which absolutely no one else could have written. It draws upon unique personal relationships and reminiscences. But Dr. Reynolds has not told us merely about Sayers' Dante translations and lectures, long choosing and beginning late; she has told us about Sayers' radio broadcasts on Dante, her proposed Dante novel, her carefully planned study on the Beatrician vision; and she has discussed the part Charles Williams played in guiding Sayers in her Dante study. This book observes a brilliant mind meeting a Great Poet and becoming continuously awed, inspired and energized by his verse and vision. This book presents a sublime irony in a person who disavowed possessing a mystical temperament but nonetheless endorsed the Affirmative Way and brought her soul to support the Poetry of the Image, the Hierarchy of Love and the Co-inherence. Like all other heroes of faith, she being dead yet speaketh.

RALPH E. HONE

Redlands, California

PREFACE

Dorothy L. Sayers, the detective novelist who created Lord Peter Wimsey, also wrote poetry, religious dramas and a number of influential articles on the Christian faith. Her book entitled *The Mind of the Maker,* published in 1941, which examines the concept of the Trinity in terms of human creativity, is still highly regarded by both theologians and students of literature. During the last thirteen years of her life (she died in 1957, aged sixty-four) she was at work on a verse translation of Dante's *Divina Commedia,* on which she also gave a series of memorable lectures. These were later published in two volumes: *Introductory Papers on Dante* and *Further Papers on Dante.* After her death a third volume, *The Poetry of Search and the Poetry of Statement,* made available lectures she had given on Tennyson, on the legend of Faust, on allegory and on the art of translation. Her last publication, in 1957, was a verse rendering of the eleventh-century French epic, *The Song of Roland.*

Many readers of her detective fiction are unaware of these other works. Many, on the other hand, acquainted for years with the three volumes of Dante's *Comedy* published in the Penguin Classics, learn with surprise that the translator is the same Dorothy L. Sayers who wrote detective stories. Some resent this versatility. During World War II, when the BBC invited her to write a series of plays on the life of Christ, many fans of Lord Peter expressed disgruntlement that his creator should have, as they put it, "gone all religious." Nowadays too it is not unusual to hear this view expressed. The popular picture

of her is of a disintegrated writer, almost a split personality. Even among those who discern a line of development rather than of divergence there are some who deplore it.

In this book I attempt to show that the young Dorothy Sayers who brought her debonair, aristocratic sleuth into being in the pages of *Whose Body?* in 1923 is the same in essentials as the mature scholar-poet-interpreter who made Dante intelligible and relevant to millions of modern readers; and that to see this is to have a deeper understanding of her earlier works. In this I have been anticipated in some degree by Ralph E. Hone, who shows clearly in *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* how each stage led to the next in her creative and intellectual development. Mary Brian Durkin in her work *Dorothy L. Sayers* has also perceived that the study and interpretation of Dante was a fulfilment of all that had gone before.

In this book I also examine the effect which Dorothy Sayers' work on Dante has had. For a remarkable cultural event has taken place: since the publication of *Hell* in 1949, followed by *Purgatory* in 1955 and by *Paradise,* which came out posthumously in 1962, Dante has had more English-speaking readers in the last forty years than he had in the preceding six and a quarter centuries.

This was made possible by the availability of the Penguin Classics, an innovation in editing and publishing the impact of which has yet to be fully appreciated. Begun almost by chance by Dr. E. V. Rieu, who brought out his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in 1944, the series was in its infancy when Dorothy Sayers, who began to read Dante that same year, offered him a translation of the *Divina Commedia.* How that came about is part of the story I have to tell.

It is a story which I am privileged to tell from the inside. I knew Dorothy Sayers for eleven years, while she was at work on her translation. I heard nearly all her lectures on Dante and was responsible for arranging many of the occasions on which she gave them. She entered into lengthy correspondence with me about Dante and we had many conversations. When she died suddenly on 17 December 1957 she had translated only twenty out of the thirty-three cantos of *Paradiso;* she had not begun on the notes or the introduction. I was invited by Dr. Rieu to complete the work.

It is now thirty years since Dorothy Sayers died. The period is long enough to provide a perspective. It is time to assess her contribution

to both general understanding and specialized knowledge of Dante; to define what she set out to do, and why, and the extent to which she succeeded; and to show how this vast undertaking was related to the rest of her work, to her life and to her convictions.

I once said to her: "I don't think people have yet understood what it is you're doing regarding Dante. One day I want to write a book about it." I was half jesting, but she replied, seriously, "I hope very much that you will."

BARBARA REYNOLDS

Cambridge, England
13 December 1987

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

It is now almost half a century since Dorothy L. Sayers died, yet her work on Dante lives on vigorously, as do her detective novels. All three volumes of her translation of the *Divina Commedia* have recently been republished by Penguin Classics and the present book, long out of print, continues to be in demand.

I am pleased that Mr. Ted Lewis of Wipf and Stock Publishers, Oregon, has undertaken to make it available again. This gives me the opportunity to correct three inaccuracies which became apparent to me while I was editing Dorothy Sayers' letters. They are the following:

Chapter I, p. 11: The play *He That Should Come* was first broadcast by the BBC on the program known as *The Home Service*, not on *Children's Hour*.

Chapter XIV, facing p. 219: The caption should read, "Dorothy L. Sayers in the year 1953. From a portrait by Fritz Kraemer."

On p. 252, Note 15: A blank has been left for a page reference. It should be 216.

I am grateful to the many readers who have expressed appreciation of this book and hope that its reappearance will bring them pleasure.

BARBARA REYNOLDS
CAMBRIDGE 2005

Acknowledgements

My first debt of gratitude is to the late Anthony Fleming, who gave me every encouragement and assistance in the early stages of this book. He not only supplied me with photocopies of his mother's letters which were specifically about Dante; he combed through a great deal of other correspondence for references which he thought might be useful to me. He read the first three chapters in draft and made many helpful suggestions. Unhappily, he did not live to see the work completed.

There are many others to whom I am grateful. Above all, I wish to thank the novelist and poet Sylvia Bruce, who read every draft, chapter by chapter, and gave me the benefit of her advice both as a writer and as a former copyeditor. She had already rendered me invaluable assistance in her latter capacity when I translated Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* for Penguin Classics and I knew that I could look to no better guide. I acknowledge with gratitude the help of Philip L. Scowcroft, Research Officer of the Dorothy L. Sayers Society, who also read every chapter and kept an eagle eye on the accuracy of my facts. Walter Scott, another member of the Society, and Professor Brinley Thomas, a friend of long standing, gave me much helpful criticism. Professor Ralph E. Hone, author of *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography*, another friend, accompanied me as I went along and heartened me with his generous help. I thank him for his permission to quote from his book and I am further grateful to him for his gracious Foreword.

There are also many to whom I turned for help and advice on specific topics. The late Patrick McLaughlin, who knew Dorothy Sayers well, gave me valuable insights into the relationship between Dorothy's own faith and her exposition of the *Divine Comedy*. Alice Mary Hadfield gave me helpful information relating to Charles Williams and kindly allowed me to quote from her own writings. The Reverend Dr. Brian Horne read through the chapters relating to Charles Williams as well as the chapter concerning Atonement Theology. On this I was helped also by the Reverend Lorna Dazeley, Deacon of St. Andrew's Church, East Chesterton, Cambridge, and by Prebendary E. C. C. Hill, Librarian of Lichfield Cathedral. To the Dean and Chapter of that Cathedral I owe thanks for permission to quote from documents relating to the performance of *The Just Vengeance* at the Lichfield Festival of 1946. For information about the staging of this play I am indebted to Norah Lambourne, who designed the scenery and who has drawn a diagram specially for this book. She also supplied photographs relating to the production which are included here and allowed me to quote from letters written to her about it by the director Frank Napier and by Dorothy Sayers herself. I wish also to thank Marcus Whichelow who acted in the play and Stewart Lack who saw it performed for allowing me to quote from their recollections.

The Reverend Walter Hooper most kindly sent me copies of correspondence between Dorothy Sayers and C. S. Lewis bearing on her work on Dante and traced the origin of a comment by C. S. Lewis which had been quoted elsewhere without identification. Ursula Bickersteth sent me copies of letters from Dorothy Sayers to her father, Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, of whom she also kindly supplied the photograph which is reproduced here. I thank her also for allowing me to quote from her father's introduction to his translation of the *Commedia*. Ruggero Orlando sent me a lively account of his conversations with Dorothy Sayers on the subject of Dante's metrical variations and also kindly allowed me to publish his photograph. Giles Scott-Giles, the son of Wilfrid Scott-Giles, and Wilfrid's sister Phyllis, provided much information and Giles most fortunately discovered the originals of his father's diagrams of *Hell*, which are here reproduced more clearly than would have been possible otherwise. He also kindly allowed me to quote from letters in his possession and

supplied a photograph. The Confraternitas Historica of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, who twice invited Dorothy Sayers to address them, have kindly allowed me to quote from their records. For this privilege I was much indebted in the first instance to the late Dr. R. C. Smail and subsequently to Dr. Derek Beales. Colin Hardie kindly allowed me to quote from our correspondence about Dorothy Sayers' work on Dante. Kay M. Baxter also graciously allowed me to quote from a lecture I heard her give at a Dorothy L. Sayers Festival held at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois in 1978. Dr. Edwige Schulte, who attended the British Council course for Italian teachers of English, held at Girton College, Cambridge in August 1954 and so heard Dorothy Sayers' lecture, "On Translating the *Divina Commedia*," most kindly traced for me the date of the Naples newspaper, *Il Mattino*, in which Cesare Foligno's tribute to Dorothy Sayers was published. James Brabazon, author of *Dorothy L. Sayers: The Life of a Courageous Woman*, permitted me to quote from this book (for which I am indebted also to David Higham Associates). William Anderson, author of *Dante the Maker*, generously granted me permission to quote a long extract from his remarkable book. Philip H. Vellacott allowed me to quote from his book *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* and from his (as yet) unpublished work, *Oedipus and Apollo*. My kind colleagues in the Italian Department at Trinity College, Dublin, Corinna Lonergan and Clotilde Bowe, discovered an article in *The Irish Press* which was eluding me. Dominic Rieu kindly supplied a photograph of his father, the late Dr. E. V. Rieu, founder and editor of the Penguin Classics. Dr. J. T. D. Hall, Deputy Librarian of the Cambridge University Library, kindly answered my enquiries about Lord Peter's folio Dante. The photograph of Dorothy Sayers taken in 1937 was supplied by Dr. Kenneth Pickering. To all these friends I am most grateful.

I am grateful also to members of my family, my husband Kenneth Imeson, my son Adrian Thorpe, and my son-in-law Andrew Lewis, for their helpful comments and advice.

Finally, I wish to thank my publishers, the Kent State University Press, in particular my editors, Dr. Jeanne West and Dr. Laura Nagy, for their skilful editorial and technical advice. It has been a pleasure to work with them.

I acknowledge with thanks permission to quote from the following authors: Dorothy L. Sayers, granted by David Higham Associates on behalf of the Estate of Anthony Fleming, unpublished material © 1989 Harbottle and Lewis; Charles Williams, granted by David Higham Associates, unpublished material © 1989 Michael Williams; C. S. Lewis, extracts from unpublished letters © 1989 C. S. Lewis Pte Ltd., extract from "Rhyme and Reason" © 1963 C. S. Lewis Pte Ltd, reproduced by permission of Curtis Brown, London; E. M. Forster, excerpt from "What I Believe" in *Two Cheers for Democracy*, © 1939, 1967, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.; Barbara Barclay Carter, extracts from *Ship Without Sails*, reproduced by permission of Constable Publishers.

The following newspapers have granted permission to quote from their pages: *The Sunday Times, The Stage and Television Today, The Birmingham Post and Mail,* and *The Irish Press.*

The illustrations contained in this book have been prepared for publication by Michael Manni Photographic, Cambridge. The photograph of Charles Williams was kindly supplied by the Marion E. Wade Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

To the Wade Center I am also grateful for the Clyde S. Kilby Research Grant which was awarded me in 1986. It gives me great pleasure that my book is thereby associated with the name of my dear friend, the late Dr. Kilby, founder and first curator of the Wade Collection.

B.R.

A Mind Prepared

. . . the impact of Dante upon my unprepared mind was not in the least what I had expected.

Dorothy L. Sayers

One of Lord Peter Wimsey's hobbies is collecting early printed books. This is the first thing the reader learns about him. In the opening pages of *Whose Body?* he is setting out to attend a book auction and has to turn back for the catalogue. A telephone call diverts him in the direction of his major hobby, detection, and he sends his man Bunter to the auction to bid for him. He is particularly anxious not to miss the folio Dante.

Dorothy Sayers was at work on *Whose Body?* between the summer and autumn of 1921.[1] She had not yet studied Dante, but she took the trouble to provide a learned footnote in which she identified the folio Dante which Lord Peter is anxious not to miss as the first Florentine edition of 1481 by Niccolò di Lorenzo. The footnote continues, "Lord Peter's collection of printed Dantes is worth inspection. It includes, besides the famous Aldine 8vo. of 1502, the Naples folio of 1477—'edizione rarissima,' according to Colomb."[2] Paul Colomb, Vicomte de Batines, brought out a three-volume bibliography of the works of Dante between 1845 and 1846. He describes the first Florentine edition (which Bunter succeeds in obtaining) as "veramente magnifica," the 1502 edition by Aldus as "graziosa e rara" and, as Dorothy Sayers correctly quotes, the 1477 Naples folio as "edizione rarissima." How did she come to know of Colomb's bibliography at this early stage?

In the spring of 1921, as a contribution to the celebrations of the sixth centenary of Dante's death, University College, London, put on

a display of books, manuscripts, pictures, statues and medals relating to the poet and his works. Among the exhibits were early editions of the *Divina Commedia*.[3] Dorothy Sayers was then living in Mecklenburgh Square, within walking distance of Gower Street, where University College is. She could easily have strolled in there one day to see the exhibition. If she did, she would have seen that several of the items on view belonged to titled personages. The 1472 *editio princeps*, for instance, was owned by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, and two copies of the 1481 folio were owned by baronets. If the idea of making Lord Peter a bibliophile had already occurred to her, why should he not collect early editions of Dante?

In 1921 Dante was in the air. Translations of the *Commedia* were reprinted, articles about it were published in the leading journals, London University Press brought out a volume of essays by eminent Dante scholars in a deluxe edition, and the *Times* contributed a Dante supplement of sixteen pages, dated 14 September 1921, the six-hundredth anniversary of his death.[4] Whether Dorothy Sayers visited the exhibition at University College or not, her interest in Dante was undoubtedly aroused. She must have called in at the Reading Room of the British Museum (now the British Library) and enquired at the central desk about early editions of the *Commedia*. She would have been directed to Colomb's *Bibliografia Dantesca*, which was then on the open shelves. Leafing through the first volume, she chose three items for Lord Peter's collection. A few copies of the folio of 1481 contain nineteen engravings by or after Botticelli. No wonder he was so anxious not to miss it!

It was in keeping with the literary climate of the time that the horror of exhuming Sir Reuben Levy's remains in *Whose Body?* should be intensified by an allusion to *Inferno:*

> Two Dantesque shapes with pitchforks loomed up.
>
> "Have you finished?" asked somebody.
>
> "Nearly done, sir." The demons fell to work again with the pitchforks —no, spades.
>
> Somebody sneezed. . . .
>
> The sound of spades for many minutes. An iron noise of tools thrown down. Demons stooping and straining. . . .
>
> A mutter of voices. The lurching departure of the Dante demons—good decent demons in corduroy.[5]

But Dante provides more than atmosphere. His presence hovers over the novel and offers a substantial clue. Between the first reference in chapter 1 and the exhumation scene, which occurs in chapter 12, there are four others. In chapter 2 Lord Peter congratulates Bunter on obtaining the folio Dante and later in the same chapter he mentions it triumphantly to Charles Parker, the Scotland Yard detective, who comes to visit him. By chapter 5 the book has been brought round to Lord Peter's flat in Piccadilly and he promises to show it to Parker, who is having breakfast with him. At the same moment Bunter draws Lord Peter's attention to a review of a new book by Sir Julian Freke, the eminent neurologist, entitled *The Physiological Bases of the Conscience.* Lord Peter feels disinclined to "stodge through" the review and refers irritably to Freke's previous book on crime: "The fellow's got a bee in his bonnet. Thinks God's a secretion of the liver." However, he tells Bunter to order the new book from the library.[6] Reading it later, Lord Peter meditates on Sir Julian's argument: the knowledge of good and evil is an observed phenomenon, attendant upon a certain condition of the brain cells, which is removable. It is this statement which moves him to exclaim: "By Jove! that's an ideal doctrine for the criminal. A man who believed that would never— . . . ."[7] And suddenly he knows what has happened to Sir Reuben Levy.

In chapter 11, when plans for the exhumation have been put in hand, Lord Peter settles down to a perusal of his folio Dante: "It afforded him no solace. . . . Nevertheless, while communing with Dante, he made up his mind."[8] That is, he decides to convey an indirect warning to the murderer, thus giving him an opportunity either to leave the country or to give himself up. This moral resolve is formed by Lord Peter while under the influence of the *Divine Comedy,* a work uncompromising on the question of free will and individual responsibility, standing at opposite poles to Sir Julian's views on good and evil. When the two works are mentioned in the same context in chapter 5, the reader is given a meaningful nudge as to the implication of the difference between them. In accordance with the "fair play" rule of detective fiction, to which Dorothy Sayers attached great importance, this clue is presented simultaneously to the reader and to the two detectives.[9]

When Lord Peter goes to see Sir Julian, ostensibly to consult him

Choſi parlammo infino all'uogho primo
che dallo ſcoglo lalta ualle moſtra
ſe piu lume ui fuſſi tutto ad imo
Quando noi fummo ſu lultima chioſtra:
di malebolge ſi che ſuoi conuerſi
potean parere alla ueduta noſtra:
Lamenti ſaettoron me diuerſi
che di pianto ferrati hauean gli ſtrali
ondio glorecchi con le man coperſi:
Qual dolor fora ſe de gli ſpedali
di ualdichiana tral luglo el ſeptembre
et dimarẹmma et di ſardigna emali
Fuſſino in una foſſa tutti imſembre
talera quiui et tal puzo nuſciã
qual ſuol uenir delle marcidẽ membre.

et ponte donde ſi comincia a uedere laltra bolgia
Et indi ſi potrebbe ueder tutta infino al fondo / ſe non ui fuſſi pocha luce. IN SV LVLTIMA chioſtra: In ſu lultima clauſura: SI CHE Eſuoi conuerſi. Sta nella traſlatione: et hauendo chiamato quel uallone chioſtro: perche ui ſono richiuſi epeccatori chome ne chioſtri de monaſterii ſono rinchiuſi emonaci et econuerſi/chiama quegli conuerſi di tali chioſtri. LAMENTI Diuerſi: Perche erono uarii et uenuono da diuerſe parti SAETTORON ME: Mi punſono el cuore di pieta: Et queſti lamenti mi ſaettauono ſtrali: equali hauenano el ferro di pianti. Elferro e/ quello che fa paſſare lo ſtrale Adunque epianti erono el ferro: perche quegli mi commoueuono piu ad compaſſione. Iliche mi commoſſe a tanta paſſione che per non gludire mi turai glorecchi. Allegoricamente dimoſtra che come Vlixe ſi turo glorecchi a canti delle ſirene: cioe non uolle udire choſa uoluptuoſa: Choſi io non uolli eſſere uincto da alchuna compaſſione di quegli che meritano ogni graue ſupplicio. QVAL DOLOR FORA. Tal dolor ſintendea in que peccatori quale ſi uede nellagoſto de glamalati ſe tutti quegli di ualdichiana di maremma et di ſardigna fuſſino in una foſſa. Doue e/ da notare che dice dagoſto: perche in quel meſe ſono molti et difficili morbi. Onde Iuuinale dixe: Et auguſto recitantes menſe poetas. Imperoche la corruptione dellaria et della qua ne gli caldi: et pe uenti meridionali genera aſſai morbi: Et maxime nellaere groſſo. Et per queſto nomina Valdichiana et Maremma et Sardigna. Valdichiana e/ fra Arezo tet Cortona et Chuſi: et monte Pulciano doue e/ la chiana fiume decto da la tini Clanis ſtagna: Et rende laer groſſo: et maxime ribollendo nella ſtate la bellecta che rimane in ſecco: Onde naſcono uari morbi. Sardigna laquale per exceſſui caldi ha laer peſtilente maxime ne luoghi piu propinqui all to.

No diſcendemo in ſu lultima riua
dellungo ſcoglo pur da man ſiniſtra
et allor fu la uiſta mia piu uiua

d Imoſtra che quando furono paſſati el ponte: et in ſu la riua di la comincio a uedere meglo gli ſpiriti di quella bolgia: equali eron nel fondo puniti dalla iuſtitia: laquale meritamente

A page from Lord Peter Wimsey's folio Dante. "While communing with Dante, he made up his mind."

about nervous strain, he converses in the waiting room with a woman who has recently fled from Russia with her small daughter. The child has been ill as the result of starvation and the memory of horrors she has witnessed. But she is now much better, says the mother, for the great doctor does marvels and is moreover treating her without charge:

> "C'est un homme précieux," said Lord Peter.
>
> "Ah, monsieur, c'est un saint qui opère des miracles! Nous prions pour lui, Natasha et moi, tous les jours."[10]

The point is thus made that (like many of the sinners in Dante's *Inferno*) Sir Julian Freke is not wholly evil. A brilliant and potentially a good man, tragically flawed by a monstrous self-regard, he betrays a life-long friend without compunction. His written confession, addressed to Lord Peter, resembles in its self-justification and lack of remorse the "confessions" which Dante's sinners make. Like them, Sir Julian is also concerned for his good name. He asks Lord Peter to make his statement known "among scientific men, in justice to [his] professional reputation." Just so do Farinata degli Uberti and Pier delle Vigne, in cantos X and XIII respectively of *Inferno*, show concern about their reputation among the living.

More than twenty years were to pass before Dorothy Sayers embarked on the study of Dante. Yet already in 1921 her "unprepared mind" had seized on the essential elements in "the drama of the soul's choice," as she was later to call the *Divine Comedy*.[11] And at this early date, as the footnote about Lord Peter's collection shows, she took pleasure in learned research.

She had acquired a taste for it at Oxford. She was already widely read as a schoolgirl, when she won a scholarship to Somerville College. She also had a good knowledge of French, German and Latin, as well as a reading acquaintance with Greek. She had never studied Italian, but when she came to read Dante it did not take her long to understand the original. After all, she was a linguist. In many ways Oxford prepared her well for her eventual encounter with Dante. The degree in mediaeval and modern languages, in which she attained First Class Honours in 1915, offered courses in Old French and mediaeval French literature. She was taught in these subjects by Mildred

K. Pope, a tutor at Somerville since 1894. A distinguished scholar, Miss Pope was the first woman to hold a readership in the University of Oxford. In 1934 she was appointed to the Chair of French Language and Romance Philology at the University of Manchester. Lewis Thorpe, the Arthurian scholar who knew her in her old age, left this impression of her:

> I remember her well in her last years, when we both used to attend the meetings of the Anglo-Norman Dictionary committee. She was a tall and dignified person, severe in feature, always dressed in black. . . . I was filled with awe by this elderly scholar who had studied in the 1890s under Fritz Neumann in Heidelberg and with Gaston Paris and Paul Meyer in Paris. . . . When addressed directly, or when she chose to make a comment, her face would light up with enthusiasm, and she was clearly a most sympathetic and lovable person.[12]

The young Dorothy Sayers was deeply impressed by Miss Pope's dedication to learning. In later years they became friends and remained on terms of mutual affection and respect until Professor Pope's death in 1957. There is a delightful portrait of this unworldly yet wise, humane scholar drawn by her former pupil in the character of Miss Lydgate in the novel *Gaudy Night,* published in 1935. In the preceding year Professor Pope's monumental work, *From Latin to Modern French with Especial Consideration of Anglo-Norman,* had been published by the Manchester University Press. The subject is intricate and required a far greater typographic variety than any publisher could nowadays afford. In the preface the author thanks her printers, who, she says, have "borne with [her] inconsistencies and vagaries with exemplary patience." In *Gaudy Night* Miss Lydgate, a tutor in English, is at work on an equally monumental book on "the Prosodic elements in English verse from Beowulf to Bridges," containing a new theory of versification which demands "a novel and complicated system of notation which involved the use of twelve different varieties of type."[13]

In 1934 Somerville College held a dinner (a "gaudy") in celebration of Miss Pope's appointment to the chair of French at Manchester. Dorothy Sayers was invited to propose a toast to the University of Oxford. In her speech she showed how deeply she revered her former tutor and her scholarly ideals:

> We in this college are this term bidding farewell to a woman who, to all who knew her, has always seemed to typify some of the noblest things for which this University stands: the integrity of judgment that gain cannot corrupt, the humility in face of the facts that self-esteem cannot blind; the generosity of a great mind that is eager to give praise to others; the singleness of purpose that pursues knowledge as some men pursue glory and that will not be contented with the second-hand or the second-best. Mildred Pope would be the first to say that Oxford made her what she is; *we* say that it is the spirit of scholars like her that has made Oxford anything at all.[14]

Miss Pope's special field of study was Anglo-Norman. It is not surprising, therefore, that works written in this dialect of Old French had a strong appeal for her pupil. She was fired by her studies with an ambition to translate the *Song of Roland.* Shortly after going down from Oxford she did so, in rhyme instead of assonance. But she was dissatisfied with the result. "I still have it," she wrote long afterwards. "It is very bad."[15] In the last year of her life she published a new translation, this time in assonance, as in the original. After more than forty years Miss Pope was still an inspiration to her, as she makes clear in the acknowledgements:

> My first debt of gratitude is, of course, to my old tutor, the late Mildred K. Pope, with whom I read the *Roland* at Oxford, and to whom I owe such Old French scholarship as I possess. Unhappily, she did not live to see this translation published, but she gave it every encouragement and much practical help.[16]

Under Miss Pope's tuition the young Dorothy Sayers also read the Arthurian legends, to which she was much attracted, as can be seen from her first publication, a volume of poems entitled confidently *Op. I.*[17] Among the Arthurian characters who appear in it are Perceval, the Lady of the Lake, Merlin and Lancelot. In particular, the legend of Tristan and Iseult captivated her. She studied it with Miss Pope in the Anglo-Norman version by Thomas, edited by the great scholar Joseph Bédier, who provided in modern French prose the sections which are missing from the manuscripts, reconstructing them from other versions of the tale. She undertook to translate this work also, rendering it in rhymed couplets, combined with prose

summaries of Bédier's linking passages. Entitled *Tristan in Brittany*, it has an introduction by George Saintsbury. It is dedicated to "M.K.P." (Mildred K. Pope).

Two long sections of this translation were published in 1920 in the journal *Modern Languages*. It did not appear in its entirety until 1929, by which time Dorothy Sayers was well known as an author of detective fiction.[18] But she had not lost sight of her scholarly attainments, nor did she wish her public to be unaware of them: on the title page she appears as "Dorothy Leigh Sayers, M.A., sometime scholar of Somerville College, Oxford."

The task was a learned one. In her translator's note she writes admiringly of Bédier's "noble work of reconstruction and interpretation," which she found a "delightful and intensely interesting study." But, characteristically, her response was not only intellectual: it was also imaginative. Erudition alone would not have satisfied her. By rare good fortune, she comments, Bédier "combines profound scholarship with fine poetic insight." The powerful love story stirred in her a creative empathy which enabled her, again characteristically, to relate this twelfth-century poem to human experience of all times:

> The fatal love of Tristan and Iseult is an absorbing passion, before which every consideration must give way; but the exasperating behaviour of the lovers conforms to the ordinary, human developments of that exasperating passion. . . . There is a kind of desperate beauty in this mutual passion, faithful through years of sin and unfaith on both sides, and careless of lies and shifts and incredible dishonour.[19]

Her skill in writing verse had already been tested beyond rhymed couplets. She delighted in fixed form. Her first volume of poetry contains a masterly and beautiful example of a lay, a series of poems linked in a complex structure, composed according to the rules set down for it by the fourteenth-century poet Eustache Deschamps.[20] She enjoyed mastering a craft. The skill of translating verse had fascinated her from her school days on.[21] Pleasure in complexity was also part of the satisfaction she later found in constructing a detective story. "It is almost as satisfying as working with one's hands," she said, and she compared it with laying a mosaic.[22]

All her life she was attracted by technique, especially a technique that was new to her. Her friend Muriel St. Clare Byrne initiated her in

the craft of writing for the stage. *Busman's Honeymoon*, the play (later rewritten as a novel) which they worked on together, was an experiment in translating the conventions of detective fiction into those of the theatre. In accordance with the "fair play" rule, the play had to be so constructed as to allow every clue to be shown to the audience at the same time as it was shown to the detective. For this, the authors say, with unmistakable gusto, "it was necessary to invent a technique."[23]

Busman's Honeymoon had not yet been produced, or even cast, when Dorothy Sayers received an invitation to write a play for the Canterbury Festival of 1937. On the initiative of George Bell, dean of Canterbury, later bishop of Chichester, drama had been re-introduced into the Church for the first time since the days of Oliver Cromwell. This daring and imaginative experiment had led to T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and to Charles Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*. It is not known why Dorothy Sayers was next approached. She had not then written any of her articles (later so influential) concerning the Christian faith. The very existence of *Busman's Honeymoon* (in any case a secular play) can then have been known only to a few. It is true that her sympathetic handling of Christian themes in several of her detective novels (as in *The Unpleasantness at the Bellona Club, Unnatural Death, The Nine Tailors* and *The Documents in the Case*) had won her an enthusiastic following among the clergy. It is possible too that her second volume of poems, *Catholic Tales and Christian Songs*, was known in cathedral circles. It contains, as it happens, a brief religious play, *The Mocking of Christ*.[24]

Charles Williams, who was later to play an important part in introducing Dorothy Sayers to Dante, had first met her in 1933, soon after writing to Victor Gollancz to express his admiration for *The Nine Tailors*. The two authors lunched or dined together in London from time to time and wrote to each other about books. Between 1935 and 1936 Williams was at work on his play for Canterbury. He may well have talked with her about it and may have learned that she was herself writing a play. She may have expressed views on religious drama: they would have been decided ones, if so. Williams may even have known of *The Mocking of Christ*. Whoever else may have put in a word,[25] the fact remains that Margaret Babington, the manager of the Canterbury Festival, wrote officially to Dorothy Sayers on

Dorothy L. Sayers in 1937, the year of *The Zeal of Thy House.*

6 October 1936, inviting her to write a play, saying that she did so at the suggestion of Charles Williams.

The result was not one play but two: *The Zeal of Thy House* (a play about the rebuilding of the cathedral quire in the twelfth century) and *The Devil to Pay* (a play about Faust), performed respectively in 1937 and 1939. Both plays, devised for production in the chapter house, presented formidable technical problems, which she applied herself to solving with typical enthusiasm and panache.

In the interval between the two Canterbury plays, she ventured into what was for her yet another technique: radio drama. Her nativity play, *He That Should Come*, imagined first in terms of a listening audience only and later adapted for performance on a stage, was broadcast by the BBC on Christmas Day 1938 on the programme (no longer in existence) known as "Children's Hour."

The success of this and of her other dramatic works led to an invitation from the BBC to write a series of plays on the life of Christ. Since, like *He That Should Come*, they were intended for "Children's Hour," it was agreed that the subject should be handled not liturgically or symbolically but realistically and historically. In her introduction to the published plays, entitled collectively *The Man Born to be King*, Sayers acknowledged her fascination with technique when she wrote, "This decision presented the playwright with a set of conditions literally unique, and of extraordinary technical interest." The task was, in a sense, one of translation. The Gospel story had to be recast in a form suitable for a new and, for this purpose, untried means of communication. The audience would be varied and vast (the BBC anticipated, rightly, that the series would attract adults as well as children) and the demands on the dramatist's skill were many:

> The rhythm of speech chosen to represent this ancient modernity has to be such that it can, from time to time, lift itself without too much of a jolt into the language of prophecy. . . . Fortunately, the English language, with its wide, flexible, and double-tongued vocabulary, lends itself readily to the juxtaposition of the sublime and the commonplace, and can be stepped up and down between the two along an inclined plane. . . . The smooth execution of this movement is the technician's job.[26]

She prepared herself for the work with zest. She read and reread the four Gospels in Greek as well as in the Authorized Version. Viewing the theology in terms of dramatic truth, she exulted in the discovery that from the "purely dramatic point of view the theology is enormously advantageous, because it locks the whole structure into a massive intellectual coherence."[27]

All these new experiences, first of the professional theatre in London, then of the performance of drama in a cathedral, followed by the process of adapting the Gospel story to the technique of radio drama, suggested to her an original and profound analogy. The embodiment