

Dorothy Sayers Notes & Quotes

Strong Poisons

153. "He was one of those impetuous bubbly self-satisfied people who cannot conceive of themselves as being out of place in any surroundings, Miss Murchison was unable to determine."

181. "I'm frightened of it. One couldn't get away. I'll live with you, if you like, but I won't marry you."

253. "you have family and tradition...would people forget I had a lover?"

Gaudy Night

28. Disagreeable. Whimsey name—done her no harm—saved her—offered unswerving devotion—not expected gratitude. "I could have like him so much if I could have met him on equal footing."

32. Armstrong, "acting...silly ass about town"—"Then he was frightfully bored or detecting something", says Harriet.

33. Harriet, "Hear, hear. Nobody likes being pitied".

34. DeVine, "If you ever find a person who likes you in spite of it (detachment)...because of it—that liking has a very great value".

35. Harriet, "I disconnect myself...never know what I do feel".

57. She had begun to take Whimsey for granted...dynamite...the sound of his name provoked such explosions in herself...resent...either praise or blame of him on other people's lips..."

57. "Had he been wiped out of existence at any moment, there was nothing among her possessions to remind her of him..." [gave tickets away].

58. Marriage-- Pressure of other people's personality that does the mischief.

59. Peter "Should you categorize me heart or brain?" H, "No one could deny your brain" P, "you may deny my heart, but I'm damned if you deny its existence". [slippery dress with napkin falling and Peter's cracked ribs, "I thought you seemed a little stiff in your manner"].

63. Receives hate mail...Peter suggests a secretary, "you'll find some reason for not."

91. Upon awakening, "Peter"...one's dreams never symbolize one's real wishes".

102. Annie," Books won't teach them to be good wives".

159. Writing letter to Peter about first time acquaintance with St. George, "She could rub his aristocratic nose in the dirt".

170. H. "Poor old Peter". [a first for H.].

183. P. "write to you letters that burn on paper...unforgettable but also unforgivable".

184. P's letter about Shrewsbury problem...generous admission of equality... marriage revisited in a new light...you didn't tell me to run away and play.

238. "I'd like to see your home...five years and learned his strengths...now exposed his weaknesses.

239. P "We shall start on the infernal problem..." [Shrewsbury]. H. "Peter, what a rock you are!" ...

248. Admired his visage while he slept, "So, thought H. It has happened—does he know?"

302. "Does he think I like to see him suffering, vicarious agonies?... fancies I am going to accept the protection of his name?"

304. That, then was what he wanted her for...she had the power to force him outside his defenses...he was consistent.

320. Collar [strange!] is only thing you have let me give you...except my life".

327. It is said that love and a cough cannot be hid.

376. DeVine, "If you had really tried, you could have sent him away in five minutes...can't have been easy for him either...He'll never make up your mind for you..."

383. P. "Placente, magistra?" H. "Placent." [Does it please you, teacher?]

an overbearing or nagging woman: shrew. A woman who argues noisily.

Whimsey leaves immediately after dismissal in court. Eiluned "not doing a King Cophetua stunt". **The King and the Beggar-maid** is a 16th-century [broadside ballad](#)^[1] that tells of an African king, **Cophetua**, and his love for the beggar **Penelophon**...has become a byword for "a man who [falls in love with a woman instantly](#) and proposes marriage immediately"

141. Freddy to Peter. Genesis 29:20. So Jacob served 7 years for Rachel, and they seemed like only a few days to him because of his great love for her".

266. Mithridates he died old. Pontos Anatolia. Rome opponent had immunity to poisons.

Vaughan has a vial to "go out" when he finished Boyes' writings

Mr. Boyes' Father—no vindictive feelings—leave all vengeance in the hand of Him to who it belongs". "Had my doubts in court when I saw her".

In "The Lost Tools of Learning," Dorothy Sayers advocates for a return to classical education through the Trivium—grammar, logic, and rhetoric—as a means to foster independent learning and critical thinking.

Overview of Key Themes

1. **The Trivium:** Sayers emphasizes the importance of the Trivium, which consists of three stages of learning that align with the natural development of children:
 - **Grammar:** This stage focuses on the mechanics of language and foundational knowledge, typically for younger students. It involves learning the structure of language and developing memory and observation skills.
 - **Logic (Dialectic):** In this stage, students learn to construct logical arguments and engage in critical thinking. It is aimed at middle school students who begin to analyze and question information.
 - **Rhetoric:** The final stage teaches students how to effectively communicate their ideas and arguments, preparing them for high school and beyond.
2. **Critique of Modern Education:** Sayers critiques contemporary educational practices, arguing that they often prioritize the accumulation of facts over the development of critical thinking and understanding. She believes that students are not being taught how to think but rather what to think, leading to a lack of true learning and discernment.
3. **Independent Learning:** Sayers champions the idea of fostering independent learners who can think critically and engage with knowledge meaningfully. She argues that education should not merely fill students with information but equip them with the tools to explore and understand the world around them.
4. **Integration of Disciplines:** Sayers advocates for an integrated approach to education, where subjects are not taught in isolation but connected to one another, reflecting the interconnectedness of knowledge.

Conclusion

Sayers's "The Lost Tools of Learning" serves as a foundational text for the modern classical education movement, encouraging educators to reconsider their methods and focus on developing students' abilities to think, reason, and communicate effectively. By returning to the principles of the Trivium, Sayers believes that education can reclaim its purpose of nurturing thoughtful and capable individuals.

This summary captures the essence of Sayers's arguments and the significance of her work in the context of educational philosophy.

This photograph of the main courtroom in London's Old Bailey courthouse, from commons.wikipedia.org, will give a sense of the setting of the beginning and end of *Strong Poison*. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central Criminal Court of England and Wales \(The Old Bailey\) Court No 1.jpg#/media/File:Central Criminal Court of England and Wales \(The Old Bailey\) Court No 1.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Central_Criminal_Court_of_England_and_Wales_(The_Old_Bailey)_Court_No_1.jpg#/media/File:Central_Criminal_Court_of_England_and_Wales_(The_Old_Bailey)_Court_No_1.jpg) \

Dorothy Sayers' "Gaudy Night": Translations of Latin

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In Oxford lingo, a *gaudy* is a college feast, often for alumni or alumnae. The name derives from *gaudium*, "joy, delight," or, more likely, *gaudeamus*, "let us rejoice," the first word of a traditional college song that is used in graduation ceremonies and festive gatherings at old English-speaking universities such as Oxford.

For her title, Sayers takes the college *gaudy* and adds Shakespeare:

Anthony: Come, Let's have one other gaudy night: call to me
All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more;
Let's mock the midnight bell. -- Anthony and Cleopatra, Act 3, xiii

Speaking of Shakespeare, we cannot pass over *Shrewsbury College* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Sayers appropriates the name, but rejects the misogyny.

Introduction: In Aeternum Floreant

In *Gaudy Night's* introduction, Sayers begins with a gracious apology to the real Oxford for adapting, remodeling and repopulating it with a fictional college to serve as her story's setting.

"It would be idle to deny that the City and University of Oxford (in aeternum floreant) do actually exist..."

in aeternum floreant = subjunctive, "Forever may they thrive."

Chapter I: Statutum Est Quod

Returning to her illustrious *alma mater* with a slightly blemished reputation, protagonist Miss Vane fortifies herself against insecurity by remembering:

"Whatever I may have done since, this remains. Scholar; Master of Arts; Domina; Senior Member of this University (statutum est quod Junioribus Senioribus debitam et congruam reverentiam tum in privato tum in publico exhibeant.)"

Translation of italics: "It is established that Junior Members should display, both in private and in public, the respect which is owed and appropriate to Senior Members." Imagine a time when the college handbook was in Latin!

Domina is "mistress," feminine of *Dominus*.

Chapter 2: Invitis Occurrit...

Chapter 2 (and several other chapters) begins with a quote from Oxford scholar Robert Burton's 1621 work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. This early treatise on human psychology (before the discipline was so named) entertained readers with literary

quotes, observations on human culture, comments on the discoveries in the New World and parts east, and a Renaissance approach to scholarship which we nowadays might call “interdisciplinary.” It was a popular book in educated British circles from the 17th through mid-20th century, when (I suspect) its bad anthropology and out-of-date science became too obvious to ignore. Sayers was attuned not to those problems but to Burton’s lively insights into what we now call psychology, anxiety and depression.

By referencing Burton, Sayers is footnoting one source of her own writing style. Throughout *Gaudy Night*, both she and her academically-minded characters take pains to cite their sources openly and honestly, in contrast to the perpetrator’s crude, anonymous messages.

Here’s my translation of Chapter 2’s Burton quote in square brackets:

“’Tis proper to all melancholy men, saith Mercurialis, what conceit they have once entertained to be most intent, violent and continually about it. *Invis occurrat* [To them, unwilling as they are, it comes running], do what they may, they cannot be rid of it, against their wills they must think of it a thousand times over, *perpetuo molestantur, nec oblivisci possunt* [they are constantly harassed by it, nor can they forget it], they are continually troubled with it, in company, out of company; at meat, at exercise, at all times and places, *non desinunt ea, quae minime volunt, cogitare* [nor can they leave off pondering those things which they least wish [to ponder], if it be offensive especially, they cannot forget it.”

Chapter 3: ὄν καὶ μὴ ὄν

On the penultimate page of this chapter, Miss Vane thinks nostalgically of Shrewsbury’s denizens:

“Bless their hearts, how refreshing and soothing and good they all were, walking beneath their ancient beeches and meditating on ὄν καὶ μὴ ὄν and the finance of Queen Elizabeth.”

Actually, my copy of *Gaudy Night* has: ὄν καὶ μὴ υῶ, but the underlined words are typos. ὄν καὶ μὴ ὄν means, literally, “isness and not isness” or “being and not being.” For those who remember grammar, ὄν is the gerund (noun form) of the verb “is.”

ὄν καὶ μὴ ὄν is from Marlowe’s *Faustus*, Act I, scene I, line 12, when Faust is “bidding farewell” to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (who discusses “being and not being,” riffing on Parmenides’ philosophical poem *On Nature*.) Even in *Faustus*, the phrase gets mangled in some editions, since so few printers know Greek.

Chapter 4: Vade in pacem

Wait, hold on, don’t run away just because I used the words “ontology” and “existentialism”! Let’s get back onto steadier ground.

Second page of Chapter 4: *Vade in pacem* — “Go in peace.” Hm, that’s the usual translation, but I notice the grammar really implies “go into peace.”

Chapter 4: Num? Benigne.

Wimsey’s April 1st marriage proposal is unimposing, sad, and to the point:

One First of April, the question had arrived from Paris in a single Latin sentence, starting off dispiritedly, “Num...?”—a particle which notoriously “expects the answer No.” Harriet, rummaging the Grammar book for “polite negatives,” replied, still more briefly, “Benigne.”

I envy the days when Latin grammars still *had* lists of “polite negatives,” when people still studied Latin to compose and write in it, not just to translate dead texts.

I’ve therefore never seen *benigne* used as any sort of “polite negative,” but the word is a vocative (?) form of *benignus*, “affable, kind-hearted.” So I take it to mean, “[No], kind sir.” (It could also be adverbial: “Kindly, [no].”) Harriet doesn’t nail the door shut with an explicit *non*.

This brief exchange sets up the final couplet of *Gaudy Night* on its last page— stay tuned.

Chapter 4: Post Occasio Calva

Final page of Chapter 4: *per impossibile* — “by means of an impossibility,” a logical fallacy resting on a “contrary to fact” premise which would give Parmenides fits. (“If wishes were horses...”)

Final page of Chapter 4: *Post occasio calva*. “Opportunity is bald after[wards].”

Eh? Ah, it’s half a quote. Supposedly said by that bullish statesman of the Roman republic, Cato the Elder: *Fronte capillata, post Occasio calva*. “Opportunity [is] hairy in front, bald after.”

Or, to put it another way, when an opportunity trots towards you, you had better grab it by the forelock, because it has no tail.

Chapter 8: The Poison Pen Calls Shrewsbury a Nest of Harpies

The Poison Pen of *Gaudy Night* sticks to English invectives, except for one Latin quote stuck to a hung effigy of a woman in scholar’s robes. The passage comes from Vergil’s *Aeneid* ([Book III](#)):

tristius haud illis monstrum nec saevior ullapestis et ira deum Stygiis sese extulit undis. Virginei volucrum vultus foedissima ventrisproluvies uncaeque manus et pallida semperora fame.

Translation:

No more dismal apparition than these, nor any more savage pestilence nor [sign of] gods' wrath heaves itself from Stygian waves. *The birds' faces are those of maidens, [but] the foulest excrement[flows] from their wombs, their hands [are] taloned, and their mouths are ever pale with hunger.

**Styx is a mythical river in the underworld.*

These monsters are the Harpies, vulture-like monsters with women’s faces who nearly starved to death King Phineas by constantly snatching the meat from his table. (He was only saved by the timely intervention of the Argonauts, a squad of male heroes.) The quote is a metaphor for the vicious prankster’s grudge against the learned women of Shrewsbury.

Chapter 9: Les Beaux Yeux

After a literal run-in with Miss Vane, Viscount Saint-George sends her a pathetic and self-deprecating invitation to lunch. Harriet is not fooled:

"My dear young man, thought Harriet... if you think I can't see though that, you're mightily mistaken. This is not for me, but for les beaux yeux del la casette de l'oncle Pierre."

My very little French suggests it means “the beautiful eyes of the treasure of Uncle Peter.” That is, Saint-George is buttering her up for the purpose of keeping in his uncle’s good graces.

Chapter 12: Admirandus Flos

Chapter 12 begins with a couple more quotes from Robert Burton, including:

As a Tulipant to the Sun (which our herbalists call Narcissus) when it shines, is admirandus flos ad radios solis se pandens, a glorious Flower exposing itself; but when the Sun sets, or a tempest comes, it hides itself, pines away, and hath no pleasure left...do all Enamoratoes to their Mistress.

The phrase immediately after the Latin is a rough translation, but leaves words out. More literally: “a flower that must be admired, spreading itself to the sun’s rays.”

Narcissus, of course, is a mythical Greek youth cursed by the gods to fall in love with his own reflection, so that he perished of self-contemplation; thus this passage has a hidden irony.

Enamoratoes is one of the odder terms I've ever seen for "lovers" (or, perhaps, "the infatuated").

Chapter 12: Mulier Vel Meretrix

Reggie Pomfret's unfortunate marriage proposal to Harriet (with its amusing mental image of Harriet deflecting him with, "Drop it, Caesar," to a large dog) is interrupted by the arrival of a Proctor and minions. We get another snippet of university regulations (I assume) written in Latin, with an ambiguity at the beginning serving as a cipher for Miss Vane's uncomfortable life choices:

mulier vel meretrix, cujus consortio Christianis prorsus interdictum est.

"...[whether] wife or mistress, association with her is utterly forbidden to Christian men."

By the way, while it's used here as a euphemistic pejorative, the term *consortio* usually implies fellowship, partnership, an association of equals or comrades (*consortes*). This is exactly what Harriet wants with Peter, but believes she can never have due to the appalling debt of gratitude she owes him for saving her life. One of the plot threads of *Gaudy Night* is a courtship in which Peter ties himself in knots trying *not* to protect Harriet from mortal danger in order to cancel that debt.

Young Pomfret immediately eliminates himself from contention by promising to defend Miss Vane against the world, only to have her rescue him from the Proctor's clutches a moment later.

Chapter 12: Climbing Trees in the Hesperides

Harriet protects her ridiculous would-be suitor from the Proctor:

"I can assure you that we haven't been climbing trees." A wicked facility in quotation tempted her to add "except in the Hesperides," but she respected Mr. Pomfret's feelings and restrained herself.

The Hesperides were mythical trees on the edge of the world where grew the Golden Apples that Hercules was sent to collect. In particular, this is an allusion to one of Shakespeare's earliest comedies, [Love's Labours Lost](#):

"For valour, is not Love a Hercules, Still climbing trees in the Hesperides?" (IV.iii)

The entire scene with Pomfret is a farce, if not a comedy. The passage in Shakespeare expounds upon how poets may abandon learned studies for the sake of love. To quote that aloud would have reminded Pomfret that his love's labor was a lost cause.

Chapter 14 – Religio Medici

[Religio Medici](#) is not the religion of the Medicii family (an odd book for Lord Peter to be reading, I thought, completely bungling both spelling and grammar). Rather, it is the *Religion of a Doctor*, that is, a scientist or learned man. Written by another 17th century Oxford scholar, Sir Thomas Browne, this controversial and once-popular text was an intelligent man's exercise in reconciling science and religion.

Chapter 20: Mandragorae Dederunt Odorem

Lord Peter couches feelings in Latin rather often to take the sting out of them. About five pages into chapter 20 he mutters *mandragorae dederunt odorem* ["the mandragoras give off a scent"]. It's quote from the Vulgate Bible's translation of "Song of Songs" about love, courtship and marriage. Mandragora roots, like so many herbs, are supposedly aphrodisiac.

Chapter 23: More Robert Burton Latin

Robert Burton, that doctor of the soul, prescribes various cures for lovesickness in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, and in the end stops beating around the bush (as does Sayers, quoting this passage at the start of chapter 23):

The last refuge and surest remedy, to be put in practice in the utmost place, when no other means will take effect, is to let them go together, and enjoy one another: potissima cura est ut heroes amasia sua potiat, saith Guianerius, cap. 15. tract. 15. Aesculapius himself, to this malady, cannot invent a better remedy, quam ut amanti cedat amatum, [5829] (Jason Pratensis) than that a lover have his desire.

The translation is embedded in the passage, as was the Latin quote at the beginning of Chapter 20 which I have omitted, however, Thomas' translation loses the active/passive nuances of the Latin grammar:

potissima cura est ut heroes amasia sua potiatur — "the most powerful cure is that the hero take possession of his beloved" (*potiatur* is a curious word, passive in form, active in meaning, so that it also can be translated "be possessed by"),

quam ut amanti cedat amatum — "than that the beloved object yield to its lover." The active/passive relationship is very strongly marked here, using *amatum*, "the thing loved," for "beloved." *cedo* means "yield," but its sense of "receive" sometimes stretches enough to mean "take," so like *potiatur* its active/passive sense is slightly ambiguous.

Obviously, Sayers was trying to stress a relationship of equals, so Thomas' glossing over the active/passive nuances helps; at the same time, the only way Wimsey and Vane can overcome their impasse is if they can each accept active (taking, *potiatur*) or passive (accepting, *cedat*) roles on occasion.

End of *Gaudy Night*: Placetne?

Gaudy Night concludes with a suitably touching Latin proposal whose translation is what induced me to write this page. It looks so simple, those deceptively plain, impersonal verb forms:

"*Placetne, magistra?*" "Does it please [thee], Mistress?"

"*Placet.*" "It pleases."

But of course, it is not simple, and this is what simple Latin is for.

Whereas we use impersonal verb forms like "It's raining" or "it's hot" for boring things like the weather (while Germans, more correctly, say "it's hot to me,") Latin has a maddening habit of expressing opinions and even feelings with impersonal verbs like *placet*, "it pleases," a verb which is *always* impersonal in form while talking about personal feelings. Peter and Harriet, who have been carrying on an extended conversation about the reconciliation of heart and mind through this entire book, find a Latin word to do the job for them.

Magistra is "Mistress" in the sense of *Master of Arts*, respecting Harriet as a scholar and writer; it is also an honorific for "Lady," subtly emphasizing her choice and agency in the matter.

The *-ne* at the end of Peter's question is the sweet part, and the most significant part, and the part that just cannot be translated. Remember that odd Latin word *num* used to prefix questions when you expect a "no" answer? *-ne* is its opposite number, a question which confidently expects the answer will be "yes." That tiny shift from *num* to *-ne* sums up a five-year courtship in five letters.