

Midcoast Senior College  
Spring II 2026  
Dorothy Sayers: The Holy Mysteries  
Website Posting: Week 4

### *Gaudy Night*

#### Initial Thoughts:

1. As I've been suggesting, I believe that *Gaudy Night* is the culmination of Sayers's mystery writing career. You remember that in *The Nine Tailors*, Hilary Thorpe tells her father, "I'll write novels. Best-sellers. The sort that everybody goes potty over. Not just bosh ones, but like *The Constant Nymph*." *The Constant Nymph* was a popular novel of 1924 by Margaret Kennedy. Google AI tells us that it "explores the tension between creative freedom and social constraints." The nymph of the title is a teenage girl named Tessa who "is depicted as a free spirit representing intense artistic emotion...contrasted with the conventional life." In *Gaudy Night* Sayers breaks out of the conventions of the murder mystery to write a novel that is character-based and driven by ideas. I would say, that to a degree, Hilary is speaking for Sayers, and this is the non-bosh novel that she hopes people will go potty over. They didn't. *Gaudy Night* was not hugely successful. But it satisfied Sayers's need to write that sort of novel. She could now move on to explore, in other forms of writing, the issues that interested her and that we will see in this culminating novel.
2. Sayers was clearly playing with the word Gaudy as she was writing *Nine Tailors*. You remember that one of the bells was name Gaude, for the Gaudy family, and the inscription on the bell read: Gaude, Gaudy, Domini in Laude. As you'll pick up in the first pages of the book, the Gaudy is the name for the college reunion, when alumnae

return to renew old friendships, visit teachers, and be encouraged to support the college. This university usage of the word gaudy comes from the medieval academic anthem “Gaudeamus Igitur,” i.e., “Therefore let us Rejoice.” Throughout the book, Sayers plays off the meanings of reunion, rejoicing, and the one we are more familiar with, showy, flashy, garish.

3. Shrewsbury College, the college Sayers has invented for Harriet Vane, is based on Somerville College, one of the two original Oxford women’s colleges and Sayers’s alma mater. Somerville, like Shrewsbury, was founded on nondenominational, liberal principles. It produced many of the most important women who became leaders in the cultural and political life of the United Kingdom. And it was a hotbed of the feminist movement.



The picture above is the hall of Somerville College, as in formal dining hall. This is where Harriet’s Gaudy Dinner takes place.

4. Oxford and its culture is the center of *Gaudy Night*. As Wimsey says after his appearance late in the book, “it’s hard to be cheap in Oxford” (or words to that effect.) Of course there were and are plenty of cheap people in Oxford, but Sayers’s Oxford is the embodiment of her humanist/religious view of the world. Its identity and values are rooted in medieval scholasticism as filtered through the English Reformation and Elizabethan and Jacobean Renaissance. Oxford is different from American universities in that the authority of the university does not lie in a central administration, but in the many colleges that make it up. One applies not just to the university, but to the desired college. Each college has a distinct personality and that personality and culture is embodied in its architecture; thus all the attention that Sayers pays to the architecture of the various colleges. The teaching style at the Oxford colleges is very different from the American course based model. At Oxford, one is assigned a tutor in one’s area of interest, and one reads intensively, as guided by one’s tutor. On the basis of one’s reading meets with one’s tutor on a regular basis and presents a paper, which the tutor rips to shreds, that is to say, critiques, carefully and deeply. The tutors, or ‘Dons’ are employed by the colleges, and the university hires professors and lecturers to give lectures that are open to students. Professors and dons offer seminars in particular subjects.



The street face of Balliol College, Wimsey’s college and one of Oxford’s oldest.



- Inside the college gates, they are (mostly) organized in quadrangles, as we can see in this aerial view of the oldest quad at Merton College, built between 1288 and 1378. In Sayers's time Students were required to wear academic gowns outside of college, to classes and examinations. Commoners, plain everyday students, wore short gowns, scholars, those receiving stipends from college or university funds, and of a higher academic status, wore slightly longer gowns, and those who had taken their degrees wore full length gowns.
5. Sayers uses epigraphs extensively in *Gaudy Night*. They give hints to the inner state of the characters, the incidents of the plot, and the larger ideas that Sayers is exploring in the book. They are well worth out attention. And, as in the quotes from the other books that we've looked up, an exploration of the source, context, and meaning of the epigraphs tells us a great deal about Sayers's world. All the epigraphs are from the Elizabethan and Jacobean poets, with the exception of the ones attributed to Robert Burton. Burton was a graduate of Christ Church, one of the most splendid of the Oxford Colleges, whose chapel is the cathedral of the (Anglican) Diocese of Oxford (it is in the main quadrangle of Christ Church that Harriet meets Lord St. George, Wimsey's nephew). Burton spent most of his life at Christ Church, as a scholar and a fellow and a priest of the church. He spent most of his life as Librarian of Christ Church and in that role he

collected bits and snippets of the world's wisdom. As a sufferer from depression he finally organized these snippets into an enormous compendium of the wisdom of the ages on the nature, causes, and cures of melancholy, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. And he filled it with his own commentary. The final result is a huge, strange, fascinating book.

The epigraph for the *Gaudy Night* as a whole is from a sermon of John Donne, Jacobean rake, poet, and priest; finally, Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral (Old St. Paul's, from before the Great Fire of London). Donne's words are the essence of the Christian humanism of the English renaissance: deep respect for reason and learning guided by the Bible and shaped by the disciplines of the education system of the medieval scholastics, the Trivium and Quadrivium. Sayers argues for the continuance of this form of learning in her little book *The Lost Tools of Learning*.

"The University is a Paradise, Rivers of Knowledge are there, Arts and Sciences flow from thence. Counsell tables are Horti conclusi, (as it is said in the Canticles) Gardens that are walled in, and they are Fontes signati, Wells that are sealed up; bottomless depths of unsearchable counsels there."

If you're interested, check out this Substack posting that explores all this in more depth:

[https://melissaedow.substack.com/p/gaudy-night-allusions-1#:~:text=of%20the%20reference,-,The%20Epigraph,sermon%20\(or%20Sayers'%20choice\)?](https://melissaedow.substack.com/p/gaudy-night-allusions-1#:~:text=of%20the%20reference,-,The%20Epigraph,sermon%20(or%20Sayers'%20choice)?)

Some questions from the first half or so of the book to roll around on your tongue.

What aspects of Harriet's life and character that carry over from *Strong Poison* do we see in the beginning of *Gaudy Night*?

Why does Harriet hesitate to go to the Gaudy?

What is Harriet's attitude toward her fellow alumnae? How would you characterize Harriet from the way she reacts to old classmates?

Pheobe Tucker

Mary Attwood (nee Stokes)

Miss Schuster-Slatt

Who is Miss deVine? What role does she play in Harriet's developing life at Oxford?

Harriet and Miss deVine share the following exchange walking through the late night in the Shrewsbury Quad:

Harriet: I never know what I do feel.

deVine: I don't think that matters provided one doesn't try to persuade oneself into appropriate feelings.

Harriet: But one has to make some sort of choice. And between one desire and another how is one to know which things are of overmastering importance?

deVine: We can only know that when they have overmastered us.

What are the things that have been of overmastering importance in your life? How did you know? How did they overmaster you?

In her interview with the hardworking farmwife, Mrs. Bendick, Harriet reflects on the importance of doing the work that is one's own work, rather than convincing oneself to take on someone else's. She also comments on the lasting importance of literature and the arts.

How did you discover what was the work that was authentically yours, and that gave you life? Consider the possibility that, having taken on writing mystery stories early after leaving Oxford in order to make money and please the mystery devouring public, she is finding her own true work at last.

What is Harriet's attitude toward Wimsey as she rediscovers her love of Oxford and begins to ply her trade as a private detective?

Where do we see feminism in this first half of the book? What forms does it take?

What role do Reggie Pomfret and Miss Cattermole play in Harriet's growing self-understanding?

What are the moral dimensions of the problem/mystery that Harriet has come to Shrewsbury College to solve? i.e., is it of life shaking importance? Where does it fall on a scale from annoyance to moral disaster?