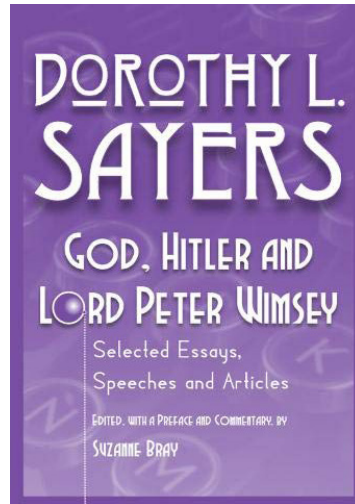


## Book Reviews

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**Dorothy L. Sayers, *God, Hitler and Lord Peter Wimsey: Selected Essays, Speeches and Articles*. Edited, with a Preface and Commentary by Suzanne Bray (Perth: Tippermuir Books Ltd., 2019), £10.00 (paperback).**

Dorothy L. Sayers is known and loved for her novels, stories, plays, and translations (and, as C.S. Lewis predicted, her letters), as well as for the fine volumes of essays and talks which she published during her lifetime. Several more of these were published posthumously. Professor Bray and the Dorothy L. Sayers Society have now happily added a substantial new selection to this collection. *God, Hitler, and Lord Peter Wimsey* consists of fifteen pieces arranged chronologically, each with an introductory note providing commentary, and each including extensive footnotes. Bray notes that most of these pieces were “not reprinted after their original publication,” while one “has never been published before, and, indeed, no one seemed to know it existed” until she rediscovered it in a BBC archive (1).



The modest word “articles” in the sub-title includes a gem for which this book will be especially treasured: a complete, richly-annotated edition of *The Wimsey Paper*—a collection of “Wartime letters and documents” supposedly written by a wide range of characters from her novels. These were “first published in *The Spectator* between November 1939 and January 1940,” and they constitute the largest (49–113) as well as one of the most delightful, work included. Anyone who enjoys the selective use Jill Paton Walsh made of them in her Wimsey novel, *A Presumption of Death* (2002), can now gratefully savor the *Papers* themselves in their entirety. The short, rediscovered BBC broadcast talk from 1937, “The Over Thirty Association,” illuminates Miss Climpson’s reference in the *Papers* to “the most important organisation for the employment of University women” (66). And two selections are closely related to Sayers’s university novel, *Gaudy Night*: one from 1937, merrily reflecting on it among the novels, and on the lives of her characters; the other, “What is Right with Oxford?,” a 1935 reworking of her own 1934 *Gaudy* (alumnae reunion) speech, which led to that novel. The earliest

selection, "Eros in Academe," was published in June 1919, just before Sayers finally left Oxford (four years—and two published books of poetry—after she had passed her examinations at a first-class-degree level). Bray's detailed annotations admit us to its wide-ranging literary approach to contemporary problems which, among other things, form part of the background to the Wimsey-Vane series of novels.

Together with *The Wimsey Papers*, six of the fearless, theologically-lucid selections included here were published in the period of the Nazi-Soviet "Treaty of Non-Aggression" (August 1939-June 1941): "Is This He That Should Come?" (Christmas 1939), "The Feast of St. Verb" (Easter 1940), and three papers for *World Review*—"Devil, Who Made Thee?" (August 1940), "The Church in the New Age" (March 1941—as well as the more detailed related lecture, "The Church's Responsibility," given in January 1941, but published later in that year together with the other papers from the Malvern conference on "The Life of the Church and the Order of Society"), and "How Free is the Press?" (June 1941). Of the latter paper, previously reprinted in *Unpopular Opinions* (1946), Bray writes that it "has been included on account of its relevance to this age of fake news" (2). In fact many selections from this period seem to have sharpened their already-keen relevance during the last year or so. They variously and admirably complement Lewis's essays of the same period, such as "Dangers of National Repentance" (March 1940) and "Meditation on the Third Commandment" (January 1941). Consider this *Wimsey Papers* entry from Harriet, Lady Peter Wimsey on January 15, 1940: "Trying to get people to see and act with imagination is like trying to hack one's way through a jungle with a penknife. But if you give up trying—well, there's Germany to look at."

Sayers's "Introducing Children to the Bible" (November 1941) chimes with her thought about her 1938 BBC children's program Christmas play, *He That Should Come*, as well as with that about *The Man Born to Be King* which would have its first episode broadcast in December 1941: both when she writes "the unspoilt appetite of a child will readily consume the undoctored food and the undoctored Bible, with its whole vitamin content of theology, mystery and poetry" (151), and when she adds, "It was all real history, full of ordinary men and women pursuing their own ambitions and desires, and heedlessly slaughtering the living Truth in the process, as they have always done and will again" (152). Of "The Execution of God", Bray notes it was published in March 1945, in time "to provide some publicity and commentary for the last five plays" of *The Man Born to Be King* (176), about to be rebroadcast in a new production.

As a contribution to a book of "answers to questions from Boy's Clubs" (180) published in 1950, Sayers boldly tackled "Is there a Definite Evil Power that Attacks People in the Same Way as there is a Good Power that Influences People?" in nine vivid pages.

The book closes with “Sacred Plays,” a fascinating series of three articles published in America in 1955, but with the first being a revision of “a lecture on “Church and Theatre” given at St. Anne’s House, Soho in June 1943” (190). The reader is left tantalized as to just how much of this talk is still in its original form, for it invites comparison with C.S. Lewis’s “Myth Became Fact” – published in the autumn of 1944. If Sayers, in 1919, cheerfully brings the *Heptaméron* of Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549) to bear in illuminating contemporary problems, here she shows in detail how a contemporary religious-drama producer whom she admires nonetheless in one case fails dismally in comparison to “the wonderful piece of production in the great Mons Cycle of 1501” in its “ingeniously and economically” asserting “to all eyes the two great credal affirmations that Christ was a true man with a “reasonable soul” as well as human flesh, and that even in death and hades He remained at every moment true God” (204).

The “Acknowledgements” warn that “Whilst careful editing and proof-reading has taken place there may be errors” (vi). Perhaps the handful of them which I noticed could be corrected in classic fashion on the endleaf in future reprints (of which there deserve to be many). Bray notes that “Colleen B. Gilbert’s 1978 bibliography of Sayers’s published works fills 237 pages” (1). Readers of this excellent selection can only hope that Bray will edit more volumes like it.

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