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Colchester's Legend on Stage: *The Emperor Constantine* by Dorothy L. Sayers¹

ANTONINA HARBUS

When Dorothy L. Sayers was asked to write a play for the Colchester Cathedral Festival (part of the Festival of Britain) of 1951, she took the opportunity of using Colchester's favourite legend concerning the town's patron, St Helena. This legend was an obvious choice for Sayers: not only was Helena important for her legendary discovery of the True Cross, she was also claimed by Colchester as a local girl. Most importantly for Sayers' purpose, this legendary Helena, as the daughter of Old King Cole, conferred British ancestry on her son, Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome.² The festival play, which Sayers called *The Emperor Constantine*,³ exploits the local legend specifically to tie Constantine to Colchester and thereby to justify situating the origins of her story on home soil. But once the play is underway, the familiar legend is relegated to the background so that Sayers' real interests – fourth-century ecclesiastical history and Christian theology – can take the spotlight. Now that the fourth volume of Sayers' letters has been published, the dramatist's passionate attitude towards her subject matter and personal involvement in staging this ambitious and complicated play have come to light and can be examined in the context of her strategic use of the legendary tradition by which Colchester lays claim to Helena.

Most interestingly, these letters show that Sayers' playful handling of the legend was the very means by which she could bring religious history to the public domain and put into practice her unique theatrical method based on presenting ideas rather than action. Her use of the legend was therefore both purposeful and rhetorically calculated. In *The Emperor Constantine*, Sayers has constructed the Colchester legend for her twentieth-century audience and shaped it according to very specific agendas, motivated by her determined belief in the dramatic potential of theological debate and her own genuine interest in Christian history. An appealing local legend was the vehicle for bringing alive in the theatre this unusual dramatic focus, played out in grand

courtroom-style debate, to the delight of its initial audiences. This play celebrating local royalty and the early days of a unified Christian Church was particularly welcome in the still fairly austere and nationally conscious context of post-war Britain, but Sayers has done more than bring to her immediate audience her enthusiastic commingling of legend and religion. She has realised the powerful dramatic and educative potential of exploring philosophical ideas within the context of culturally based attitudes such as local pride in a legendary heroine. For this reason, her play deserves to be taken out of mothballs and re-examined, both for the way it functioned within the rhetoric of the occasion of its initial performances, and also for some explanation of how Sayers was able to generate theatrical excitement from the unlikely nexus of legend and religion on the stage.

Although Sayers is today much better known for her detective fiction and translations of Dante than her drama, she was evidently in some demand in her day as a playwright, having written four plays by invitation.⁴ As with four of her earlier plays, Sayers chose a Christian theme for her last play, *The Emperor Constantine*.⁵ All of her plays are based on the conviction that the theatre provided an appropriate platform for the expression of Christian themes to the populace at large, but this play is slightly different from the others in that it uses secular legend to enhance and even to explain the theological material. Apart from its topical value at the time of the Colchester Festival, this elaborate drama is of interest today for the strategic deployment for very personalised interests of an outlandish legend concerning Old King Cole, a British princess Helena, and, more centrally, the Emperor Constantine. In this play, which Sayers both wrote and produced, she reinvigorated a legendary story energetically promoted in Colchester since the Middle Ages, and acknowledged elsewhere, even outside Britain. Sayers exploited the opportunity of this local legend to excite interest in early Christian theology and history, of which the historical Helena (c. 248–c. 327) witnessed some key moments, though she did not have any legitimate connection with Britain. The most important of these occasions in Helena's life in terms of Christian history and the event on which Sayers chose to focus was the first "universal" church council arranged by Constantine at Nicaea in 325.⁶ Constantine called this synod primarily to deal with the potentially destabilising conflict between orthodox and Arian Christological belief. At this council, eastern and western bishops argued over whether the Son of God was fully divine (as in orthodox theology) or directly created by God and therefore not fully sharing God's nature (as in the Arian heresy). The difference in the terminology amounted to only a single letter *i* (Greek *iota*): the Son and the Father were *homoousion*, "of one substance," or *homoiousion*, "of like substance." The orthodox position prevailed at the council, and the new Nicene Creed, a basic statement of Christian belief, was written to enunciate specifically that the Son was co-eternal with God, using the former word: "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."⁷

Sayers was excited by the idea that “the reign of Constantine the Great is a turning point in the history of Christendom” (Preface 5), and especially that “the great theological argument which ‘split the church for an iota’ [...] at Nicaea” (Preface 8) was of great dramatic interest. Local legend was the vehicle for inviting the audience into that excitement and bringing closer the remote events depicted. The debate at the Council of Nicaea is the heart of Sayers’ drama in *The Emperor Constantine*, where she situates the theological question of the eternal relationship between God and the Son within the context of local history, which also happens to place importance on parentage, especially the legitimacy and British mother of the central character, Constantine. This unusual combination of dramatic impetuses enacts the author’s unique views on what can be suitable for dramatic presentation. By packaging a universally significant theological dilemma within the familiar context of a local legend, Sayers was able to satisfy her brief from the bishop and the expectations of her Colcestrian audience, as well as pursuing her own private passion and making it comprehensible to a 1950s British audience. Her retrieval of debate over Trinitarian theology into a central and public position in this dramatic discourse is further mediated by linguistic and cultural tailoring: both her inscription of identifiably English middle-class values into her drama and also the presentation of the view on the street concerning the theological debate in some light-hearted scenes. All of this input has created an extraordinarily unusual play, both custom-made for a particular time and place and imbued with its author’s interests and aesthetic principles. Sayers’ own letters assist in an exploration of her perception of how local legend can illuminate theology.

Sayers admitted that she chose the play’s subject matter on the strength of the legendary connection between Helena and Colchester, but found Helena of little interest compared with the competing attraction of Constantine and his role in establishing Christianity as an official religion of the Roman Empire. In a letter to the Rev. V. James, (an Orthodox priest writing from Helsinki) written after the production of the play in 1952, she explains that the bishop of Colchester had originally wanted a play about Helena, but Sayers rejected this idea because “there didn’t seem much to say about Helena, except the story of the Finding of the True Cross – a subject in which I didn’t think the average British audience would take much interest” (*Letters* 4: 36). This attitude towards the local heroine would not have impressed anyone in Colchester (had she voiced it there) and says a good deal about Sayers’ scepticism concerning the interest value of the key symbolic event in Christian history, even for the audience of a cathedral festival. Coincidentally, just prior to Sayers’ play, Evelyn Waugh had used the British Helena legend in his 1950 novel *Helena*,⁸ and he comes to the opposite conclusion regarding the relative interest value of Helena and Constantine. Waugh made a conscious decision to write about Helena during his visit to Jerusalem in 1935 (Hastings 538), eschewing her more famous son,

whom Waugh found “not a sympathetic figure” and “a shit in my book” (Waugh 362, 223).⁹ Perhaps Sayers gauged the public’s interest in Christian history a little more accurately than Waugh did: her play enjoyed initial success, though removed from its festival context is little read today,¹⁰ like Waugh’s critically unsuccessful and largely forgotten novel.¹¹

This decline in interest is partly, but not wholly, due to the circumstances of the play’s production for a specific, ecclesiastical occasion. But T.S. Eliot’s far more successful attempt to celebrate a local religious figure in a festival play, in *Murder in the Cathedral* (commissioned for the Canterbury Festival of 1935), demonstrates that specific geographical relevance and religious subject matter can produce more widely appealing drama. Eliot’s success perhaps lies in his focus on Thomas à Becket’s psychological and spiritual journey towards martyrdom rather than on the historical or political circumstances that brought about his death (Weales 189–90). His focus on “universal truths embodied in a historical situation” (Harben 112), like George Bernard Shaw’s treatment of his subject in *Saint Joan* (1923), more readily enables the past to be made relevant to the present for the viewer or reader. But perhaps Sayers’ agenda was more event-focused, her play designed to be more ephemeral than Shaw’s and therefore a greater degree of authorial self-indulgence was permitted to her. She appears to have delivered what was requested and expected of her by the bishop, and captured the interest of her Colchester and London audiences in theological debate through her skilful situation of this matter within the context of local legend. Although this legend of a British princess Helena is still acknowledged today (and still believed by some to be true), the nationalistic resonances and indeed the theological focus would have provided additional dimensions of interest to audiences in the 1950s.

The key to the legend at the heart of the play is the claim that the first Christian emperor, Constantine (d. 337), through his mother Helena, had British (specifically, Colcestrian) blood. This story can be traced back to written references in the tenth century, and was developed by the Anglo-Latin historian Geoffrey of Monmouth (whose *Historia regum Britannie*, c. 1138, was a major vehicle for the legend’s dissemination). Geoffrey’s work was later exploited by Henry VIII to acquire a link to the Roman Empire, and was cited in many other sources both written and non-textual up to the twentieth century.¹² For a thousand years, British writers had sought to claim the mother of Constantine the Great and legendary founder of the True Cross as an aristocratic countrywoman, despite the evidence of late Roman sources that she was born in Asia Minor (probably Drepanum, now Yalova in Turkey) in humble circumstances. Even when it was questioned by eighteenth-century humanists and was eventually discounted in historical accounts as a result of Edward Gibbon’s blunt denial of the legend (Gibbon 6: 428), the legend nevertheless continued to live on in less formal contexts, and was especially retained in Colchester.

The town of Colchester came to be linked with the legend in the tenth century, when the Essex town Colne-cestre (named after the river Colne) came to be known by this name (Linder 92). Although the change probably exemplifies the common linguistic development of the simplification of consonant clusters (-*lnch-* to -*lch-*) in the middle of a word, by the early twelfth century a new folk etymology had been constructed around this name, based on the belief that it denoted “fortress of Cole.” This interpretation conveniently found a new local base for Cole Hen,¹³ the legendary mid-fifth-century Penine ruler from whom several Welsh genealogies are traced.¹⁴ This Cole, who is probably “an eponymous invention” (Benham 239), achieved his own lasting fame in British folk history, and was honoured in the eighteenth-century nursery rhyme commencing “Old King Cole was a merry old soul.”¹⁵ Sayers invokes this rhyme in her play, which opens in Colchester with the sleeping Cole (“Coel” in her spelling) surrounded by his three fiddlers (13). Colchester was a plausible choice of residence for this leader, not only because of the similarity of the names, but also because it had been the site of an important Roman city (Kightly 81).

Despite the general muting of the legend in modern times, the town of Colchester has continued to regard Helena as its patron. A twelve-foot high bronze statue of her was erected on the tower of the Town Hall in 1902,¹⁶ and Helena and the Cross or its nails feature in several official contexts, including the town’s arms and insignia (Cooper 277). For Colcestrians in particular, Helena had become a sort of local treasure not to be relinquished, thereby enabling the power of tradition to assume the force of historical validity. It is unsurprising, then, that when the bishop approached Sayers, he “wanted a play about St Helena” (*Letters* 4: 31). Sayers complied with this request, but not wholeheartedly: Helena is a character in the play, but a minor one on the edges of the action, and her spiritual life is a given attribute, not a developing one.

But Helena’s faith might have lent itself to closer treatment under different hands. In his novel, Evelyn Waugh explores the development of religious feeling in the British princess Helena and examines her motivations for setting out to find the Cross on which Jesus was crucified, an act with which a separate cycle of legends had credited her since the fourth century (Harbus 20–22). Sayers, on the other hand, features Helena less prominently in her play, and mentions her search for the Cross only at the very end of her drama ([183]; in the Epilogue, she appears carrying the Cross [189]). Helena is very much secondary to the titular character of the play, Constantine. Through her selective treatment of historical and legendary material, Sayers uses the British legend as a vehicle for launching Trinitarian theology onto the consciousness of her local audience and debate over Helena’s origins as a way of foreshadowing the great debate of the council of Nicaea.

The Emperor Constantine opens in the year 305 at King Coel’s palace at Colchester, when Helena meets both her ex-husband, Constantius (Flavius),

and their son, Constantine, for the first time in ten years: all the stuff of legend. The rest of the play is more firmly based in historical fact: it treats Constantine's proclamation as emperor in York, his growing interest in the Christian Church during his imperial career, and his baptism on his deathbed in 337. His final repentance and commitment to his new faith occur after his murder of his son Crispus on a false charge of having raped his stepmother, Fausta, whom Constantine orders to be executed for her role in the deception. Alongside this human drama, the heart of the play concerns Constantine's role in a politically charged theological dispute. Soon after he had ended the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, Constantine commanded the first assembly of Christian bishops, the Council of Nicaea, to unite a fledgling Church fractured over the Arian controversy. The debate between the orthodox side, represented in part by Athanasius, and the heretic Arius (Act Three, scene five) is the dramatic high point of the play and the part most closely researched by Sayers. The theology was of profound personal interest and importance to her. Sayers explicitly based her own faith on the creed formulated at Nicaea, and wrote about the subject on more than one occasion.¹⁷ It is understandable, therefore, that she personally found this religious council to be of monumental spiritual significance and chose to focus on its dramatic potential, though she was sufficiently aware of the esoteric nature of this subject to encase it within more accessible local legend. A Constantine born of a Colcestrian mother provided the perfect reason to focus on this decisive Christian event for the Colchester Festival and the means of engaging the sympathies of her audience.

Sayers was not the first dramatist to feature Constantine, but she was the first to tie him so closely to Colchester in a play.¹⁸ This unique focus on Constantine and his role in the religious controversy at Nicaea in 325 was a deliberate one by Sayers, as was the invocation of the British legend, the two imaginatively conflated to draw the local audiences' attention. Only the opening scene of the play is set in Colchester, though King Coel appears as a spirit in the Epilogue to revoice his prophecies regarding Constantine (188–90) and to close the play on an ethereal note, appropriately leading into the final incantation of the Nicene Creed, the wording of which has been debated in great detail in Act Three. This link creates the "special British interest" mentioned on the dust-jacket blurb of the printed version of the play. Sayers invokes the British legend with this opening (perhaps to get off on the right foot with her original partisan audience), though it is not of key importance to her central interest in Christian history. This choice to present Helena as a British princess, like other manipulations of historical stories by the playwright, was not made in ignorance of other competing versions of Helena's biography and was a concession to the bishop and her audience in Colchester, who she knew expected a sympathetic position regarding the legend. In an explicit expression of context-specific appropriation, Sayers tells the Rev. V. James in a letter,

The modern historians are unkind to the English tradition, insisting that Constantine was born in Nyssa, and that Helena was neither the wife of Constantine (*sic*; rightly Constantius) Chlorus nor a British princess, but on the contrary his concubine and a Bithynian barmaid by calling. Naturally, the play being for production at Colchester, I chose the tradition more flattering to the Saint and to our country – but I got some fun out of allusions to the other story in the course of the action. (*Letters* 4: 31, 36)

This historical construction of Helena as a humble barmaid is alluded to on several occasions in the play, though only to be discounted, and to create a climate of debate in the drama. This alternative biography is dealt with in the opening of the play, when Helena discusses the past with her (ex) husband, Flavius (Constantius):

HELENA. [...] You remember, in our old garden in Nyssa?

[...]

FLAVIUS. We had very happy times at Nyssa.

HELENA. And at Drepanum, when were first married.

FLAVIUS. And were billeted at that big inn with the farmyard, and the pigs *would* always wander into the dining-room.

HELENA. And the day the landlady was taken ill, when I went and gave them a hand in the bar. And you were so cross with that fat wool-merchant who wanted me to sit on his knee. (22–23)

Their son Constantine (not yet emperor) brings the barmaid theme further into the spotlight and provides an explanation for the livelihood of this story and its value to him:

CONSTANTINE. So *that's* why.

FLAVIUS. Why what?

HELENA. What's why, darling?

CONSTANTINE. That's why they call me the barmaid's bastard.

FLAVIUS. Do they, by God!

HELENA. (*conscience-stricken*) My dearest boy! How dreadful! Somebody must have recognised me and thought – Oh, dear, I'm so sorry –

CONSTANTINE. Don't worry, Mother. I didn't contradict them. (*Grimly*) It's been safer these last few years to be the by-blow of a Bithynian barmaid than the son of a Christian princess. (23–24)

The interjections, oaths, and expressions of dismay uttered within this passage encode a culturally specific English, upper-middle-class form of discourse, which is sustained throughout most of the play. The exclamatory remarks, endearments, and formally correct grammar and syntax are social markers. The form of these remarks, as well as their connotations, mitigate

against the apparently unpleasant connotations of the legend that Helena had been a barmaid and Constantine perhaps born outside wedlock. Helena's aristocratic behaviour and bearing rescue her from this unappealing background. Sayers has many of her characters speak in a way familiar to much of her theatre-going public who would recognise in characters sensibilities typical of the mid-twentieth-century English upper-middle class:¹⁹ the expressed outrage at the barmaid slander, and the awareness of personal dignity, moral code, and ethical behaviour. But not all the characters in the play speak like this. In contrast, Sayers caters to other social strata in her audience when she later introduces the voice of the ordinary person on the street, in the form of the fishmonger's boy and the barbers (Act Three, discussed below), providing a greater variety of registers and range of interest in the theological debate as well as some comic relief.

Sayers keeps the matter of Colchester's connection with the action firmly in the foreground at the opening of the play, when the matter of Constantine's legitimacy is brought plainly into the discussion. His question is used by Sayers to do a bit more (perhaps dramatically extraneous) explaining and historical sketching for the audience, and also to provide a bit of thematic counterpoint to the central interest in the divine Father–Son relationship:

CONSTANTINE. By the way, since the subject has cropped up – do you mind telling me whether I am legitimate or not? Just as a matter of curiosity.

FLAVIUS. It's a little complicated. Your mother and I were married here in Colchester by the Christian bishop. [...] Then when Diocletian insisted on my marrying your step-mother, I was obliged to divorce your mother, by Roman law. But Christians don't recognise our State divorces, so you see –

CONSTANTINE. So in Christian eyes, you two are still married?

HELENA. Yes. (24)

Helena's reputation as a barmaid is alluded to again later in the play in the scene in the barbershop, when the servant Togi is outraged by a fellow-customer's comment about "that old trollop Helena flaunting about in the purple" (127). It seems an eyewitness to her servile activity is at hand when a general says, "[F]orty years back, [she] served me with drinks at Drepanum" (127). The ensuing brawl within the barbershop occasioned by these slanders occurs in close proximity to the similarly heated verbal duel of the Council of Nicaea and provides a nice parallel to it, bringing the friction of competing interpretations to a physical clash, and keeping up a spirited defence of the more palatable form of the legend. In this manner, Sayers is able to dramatise the implications of Helena's background, to manufacture some stage interest out of the competing legends and human propensity for gossip, while at the same time confirming the legitimacy of the legend for her local audience who probably reflected a range of social speakers.

Despite these playful and even apologetic references to the “barmaid” story, Sayers was aware of the historically probable version of Helena’s birth in Asia Minor, as she had undertaken some research for the project, but deployed it selectively to fit her plan for a Colchester-based Helena. In a letter to the Rev. James, she admits to having followed closely A.H.M. Jones’ then recent history, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (1948), *except* for Helena’s early life (*Letters* 4: 39). But despite her reference to the story as myth, it appears that Sayers at least entertained the possibility that the British legend had some legitimate basis, and certainly presents it as such in her play, confident that her audience would be “even more fumbling and ignorant than myself” (*Letters* 4: 38). Her defensive comment to James that “the modern historians are unkind to the English tradition” is explained in the Preface to the printed version of the play. Constantine’s mother, she says, was later recognised as a saint, and although early sources refer to her as Constantius’ concubine,

a barmaid, indeed, from Bithynia, an ancient and respectable tradition affirms, on the other hand, that she was his lawful wife, a princess of Britain, daughter of the local chieftain “King” Coel of Colchester [...] If this is so – and Colchester will hear no word to the contrary – she may well have been a Christian from her birth; for in the 4th century there was already a Christian church, with a Christian bishop, at Colchester. (Preface 7)

Like many writers before her, including Waugh, Sayers equates the legend’s longevity with respectability. Unlike Waugh, though, Sayers pays no attention to Helena’s spiritual development, because she depicts her as a Christian from birth, a necessary aspect of the British legend that she adopted for the play. Mistaking legend for historical possibility, the otherwise well-informed Sayers assumes that a British Helena would have been Christian, though this status would have been unlikely in the third century. Even the finding of the Cross is introduced only very briefly in the last scene before the Epilogue: Helena dreams of the discovery and begs Constantine for the means of going to Jerusalem, to which he agrees (183). As implied in earlier sources, the journey is at least in part an act of expiation for the murder of Fausta and Crispus, and represents an outward manifestation of Constantine’s acknowledgment of his sin and his need for baptism.

Sayers was aware that she was transmitting a legend, and that this was part of the play’s appeal for her, one that she was confident her Colcestrian audience would share. She makes no pretence that she represents the historical facts of Helena’s life, though she takes the religious matter of the play more seriously:

But one does not go to Ainsworth for one’s history – any more than one would go to my own *The Emperor Constantine* for the historical facts about St Helena. (Since it

was written for Colchester, she *had* to be a British Christian princess, the daughter of King Cole. The local myth is part of the game. Though the theology is sound enough.) (*Letters* 4: 393)

The final, defensive remark about theology encapsulates the real focus of Sayers' long play (originally close to four hours in performance):²⁰ the conversion of the Roman Empire and the development of Christian Trinitarian doctrine, particularly during the Council of Nicaea. The Colcestrian connection and the matter dealing with Helena's early life is a sweetener for launching the central interest of the play: the game to capture a place for theology on stage. Sayers is modest about her grasp of the historical details of this period. To the Rev. James, she writes: "I expect you will find it full of mistakes, because I really knew nothing about the frightfully complicated period, and had to guess at a good deal. Also, for stage purposes, I had to modify various things" (*Letters* 4: 37). But her letters (particularly those to James) demonstrate that she possessed a good understanding of fourth-century history and theology. For theological material, she used A.E. Burns, *The Council of Nicaea* (1925) and Henry Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church* (1943) (*Letters* 4: 14–15), though other references are also listed at the end of the printed edition (191), and her letters indicate that she consulted a theologian on Eastern orthodoxy and baptism (*Letters* 4: 4).

Most would agree that theological argument is a difficult topic for an entertaining play, though the central drama between Church and state and the expansive time frame (C.E. 305–37) make for a wealth of narrative interest that Sayers tries her utmost to make engaging. Clearly the play in transcript lacks so much that would have generated interest in the production, as Sayers insisted herself (*Letters* 4: 51). The long chronicle-history play with ninety-five characters and twenty-five scenes contains at its heart the dramatisation of the Council of Nicaea in Act Three, scenes four and five (with several extremely long speeches). It would be very difficult to stage in almost any theatre. Tischler describes it as an "impressive failure" with "too much 'Idea'" (109). This scope, if not the failure, appears to have been part of the design; from the start, the play was to have been an ambitious and perhaps self-indulgent undertaking. Sayers had been delighted to have "a completely free hand with the production side" and to produce a play for which the bishop also had expansive plans: "[H]e is budgeting for a good show on a biggish scale" (*Letters* 3: 444). Clearly, "history was being used to provide theatrical spectacle" (Peacock 24).

But Sayers was convinced that the drama of the Church council would work, and this determination played out in her involvement in almost every aspect of production, as was her usual practice with her dramas. She managed to involve much of the local Colcestrian population in various aspects of the play and its preparation, including the production of properties and costumes. The outcome

was a very involved local population, though at a fairly high price for Sayers herself. She was so engrossed in bringing ancient history to life that it completely distracted her from continuing her Dante translation for eighteen months (*Letters* 4: 23 and 61). She was particularly closely involved in the design of costumes and the creation of much of the (extravagantly Byzantine) jewellery and props for the production (*Letters* 4: 8 and colour plates between pages 12 and 13; black-and-white photographs on pp. 32–35), even inquiring into medical matters such as the approximate mass of a severed head (Hone 174). Costumes were designed by Sayers' friend Norah Lambourne (who also designed the sets and was employed generally as artistic designer) (see Lambourne 11–17), and some were made by the Colchester Women's Institute (Dale, *Maker and Craftsman* 144; also *Letters* 4: 16 n9); many of the actors were local amateurs, though Constantine was played by Ivan Brandt, who was thought to resemble the portraits of the emperor on coins, and Helena by Veronica Turleigh (*Letters* 4: 39). The involvement of many local people in the production would have enhanced its reception as the audience recognised their own handiwork and fellow Colcestrians on stage. A further (and non-transferable) benefit might have been the domestication for them of an otherwise alien subject through the familiarity of working on the set and with the author, as well as the recognition and local pride in seeing their home legend on stage.

All this attention to visual detail suggests Sayers' attempt to package her theological debate in an engaging and spectacular production, to provide some visual interest and veracity to support the ideas of her drama. But her desire for historical authenticity in terms of costumes and props, as well as her reliance on historical details and long-established legend, created a form of realism that was going out of fashion. Her choice to focus on doctrine rather than on psychology or the human response to the dogma pulled against the dominant directions of theatre at the time, which would result in the arrival of New British Theatre in 1956 (see Roston 301; Peacock 17, 22). Sayers' efforts to create a recognisable, even sympathetic presentation of the complex arguments involved in the Council of Nicaea was at odds with Eliot's and even Christopher Fry's more successful attempts to entertain pre- and post-war Britain with religious drama.²¹ To make her play work locally, Sayers was compelled to have her characters speak like English aristocrats or servants and express correspondingly culturally displaced sensibilities, as we have seen, and perhaps this was entertaining to the original audience in the context of the Colchester Festival in a way the printed or later performed versions could not be. Sayers appears to have taken every effort to get her message across, that the Council of Nicaea and the Trinitarian debate did and do matter and were exciting in their day. Her dedication to this dramatic and ideological mission resulted in her influencing every aspect of production in order to stamp her own imprimatur upon it, and being the driving force behind the coherence of vision and initial success of the play.

Not surprisingly, during the preparation of the production, the ambition of the project eventually exasperated everyone concerned, including Sayers. She refers to the two years in which she produced the play (shortly after her husband had become ill and died) as “trying and strenuous” (*Letters* 4: 25) and the two productions of the play “terribly exhausting and exacting” (*Letters* 4: 49). Sayers elaborates in a letter to Barbara Reynolds that does not place the Colcestrian input in a very favourable light:

We had a *fearful* time with *Constantine* – an incompetent management, obstruction and difficulty everywhere, producer-trouble, and total failure of the local sewing-parties and the local art-school to carry out their promises in the way of getting costumes and props made for the show. We were obliged to do everything ourselves. (*Letters* 4: 23)

Sayers was able to look back on events a little more sympathetically, saying a few months later, “We had great fun with the costumes” (*Letters* 4: 36). As the details in this letter attest, she had clearly given the matter considerable thought and strove for accuracy as well as scope, but produced a very superficial, even externalised, form of realism:

As the play in its original form covers 30 years of history, and goes right across the world from West to East, we were able to show a good variety of costume, from the rather outmoded Romano-British dress of the first scene (305), through the modified classical of the Roman scenes (312), with embroidered tunics and dalmatics just coming in, and a few die-hard pagans ostentatiously sticking to white togas in a spirit of opposition, to the more oriental styles of the Balkan scenes [...] all dressed as correctly as possible in *tunica*, dalmatic and/or *paenula*, as the case may be, with the *clavi* appropriate to their origin and station [...]. (*Letters* 4: 37)

Christopher Fry might have judged tastes of the theatre-going public a little more accurately in his *A Sleep of Prisoners*, which, like *The Emperor Constantine*, was produced for the Festival of Britain in 1951 (see Innes 478). Fry frames his biblical material in a contemporary setting, thereby bringing the past into closer contact with the present than Sayers appears to have done with her purely ancient settings. Sayers was clearly more closely focused on the magisterial sweep of her drama, in both its cosmic and political implications, than on tying it to the present day. She does, however, manage to humanise the drama through (albeit) anachronistic dialogue and motivations that certainly situate the characters’ subjectivity in a way likely to have been comprehensible to her 1951 English audience.

In league with this sympathetic focus, Sayers uses the Helena connection to tie the drama to Colchester and secure the indulgence of her local audience. Notwithstanding the barmaid rumour, Helena’s stature and mode of speech

are very grand in this drama, and her expansive generosity and foresight present her as an appealing local appropriation for the town. Frequently in the drama, she provides the voice of cool reason over the human and ecclesiastical drama, articulated in the vocabulary and syntax of the educated upper classes: her warning to Fausta (“My dear, it is not very wise to be conspicuously intimate with one person rather than another. It causes comment” [73]) is a chilling presentiment of the later intrigues of incestuous rape, deception, and murder (which Sayers sees no reason to dwell on). Later, Helena convinces Constantine that his conscience should be clear, even though he has just murdered his own son: “It is the hardest thing in the world – to receive salvation at the hand of those we have injured” (182).

Initially, though, Sayers invites the audience to witness Helena in a bit of her own drama. When Helena appears, it is first in a sentimentalised reunion with her former husband Constantius (Act One, scene one), and then as a loving mother to her grown son, Constantine (to whom she explains in a “*conscience-stricken*” (23) manner his legitimacy as described above). Constantine himself is consciously presented as “human and sympathetic” (*Letters* 4: 36), and Constantius (Flavius) even more so. In the opening scene, the warmth between the latter and Helena (whom he divorced for political reasons) is redolent of that comfort provided by religion and companionship as a substitute for love, which characterised Sayers’s later belief (described by Eads). Constantius and Helena turn from talk of love to the subject of Resurrection (17–18), and the emperor’s dying words are “Helena” and “Resurrection” (29), setting the tone for much of what follows, of ephemeral human drama amidst eternal salvation history.

As this exchange shows, the religious material dominates later in the play, where the personal relationships in the foreground are filial rather than erotic, though Sayers allows her own beliefs and interests to drive the discussion at times to the subject of marital relationships. Fausta, Constantine’s second wife, complains, “He hasn’t got any feelings – it’s all policy, policy, policy” (75), and the cutting exchange between Helena and her sister-in-law Constantia encodes a low opinion of masculine self-sufficiency:

HELENA. I shall always be ready to listen and sympathise, which is what boys want of their mothers.

CONSTANTIA. And all men of their womenfolk. (101)

Sayers’ own scepticism about lasting love is echoed in a later speech by the female servant Matibena: “Gentlemen with their minds full of armies and politics can’t be always loving and paying compliments – not old married gentlemen, anyhow” (164), and by Helena herself: “He loves in the pious old Roman fashion – ‘my wife, my family, my empire, my religion’ – institutions rather than people. Such men are not readily vulnerable” (162). Indeed, Sayers gives

quite a bit of airtime to a specifically female point of view in several scenes dominated by matters concerning the female characters of the drama, especially Helena and Fausta, but many others also (for instance, I.3, II.1, II.8, and II.6).

Because Sayers had a free hand in encoding her own interests in her material, all of this part of the narrative is presented as peripheral. The human drama played out in *The Emperor Constantine* takes second place to the central interest in the debate over Arianism at the Council of Nicaea, which develops from “some fantastic quibble which nobody can make head or tail of” (91) to a defining moment in Christian history when the cosmic issue of the divine and human nature of Jesus was explored and settled, and the fractured Church united under a definitive creed. Sayers makes rhetorically charged opposing speeches the way in which this drama is played out. Constantine himself is granted the mention of the decisive reference to one “of one substance with the Father” (154). Arius is presented as sullen and surprised by the emperor’s acumen: “And I took the man for a simpleton!” (155). The fiery debate that follows centres on the terminology. Secundus exclaims, “I will never accept homoöusios” (157), though the motion to include this term in the creed is carried by the vast majority of bishops.

The play works because the audience has been primed for the nub of the argument by the people on the street, all of whom speak like Sayers’ contemporaries. The fisherman’s boy sums up the orthodox position: “God begat Him, and before He was begotten, He was not” (119); and the objection to this is provided in the apparently commonsense rationale of Stephen the barber: “A son can’t be as old as his father [...] We come back to the old problem of the hen and the egg” (123). The general expresses another point of view – exasperation with the whole debate and deference to the emperor’s opinion – in his exclamation, “Curse your conundrums! Worship as the Emperor tells you, that’s my motto, and see that your boots are clean for church parade” (123).

The later action, concerning the framing of Constantine’s son, Crispus, for the rape of his stepmother, and their deaths, provides a dramatic denouement for the tension built by the heated discussion earlier in Act Three and ushers in Constantine’s remorse and Christian awakening: “I have founded Christ’s empire in the grave” (181). He has achieved what he suggested right at the beginning when he said, “The Empire needs pulling together – a new focus of faith and energy” (25). Constantine’s final act of generosity is to provide Helena with the means of discovering the Cross: “Take all the ships you want, Mother, and all the men, too” (183), with which she is seen in a vision in her final appearance on his deathbed (189). With the words of the spirit of Coel in this final scene in which the dying Constantine receives baptism, Sayers nicely unites the two legendary threads of her narrative: the tales that Helena was the daughter of Coel and the separate story that she was the finder of the True Cross.

With its quite distinct narrative structure, Sayers would not appear to have

been influenced by Waugh's novel.²² At any rate, her work on the play was well underway by the time his novel was published in 1950 (Hone 172), yet it unwittingly shares some features with the book. Like Waugh's work, hers was personal, ambitious, and critically unsuccessful, because the drama's central interest was too theological, its treatment too earnest and lacking that element of scepticism vital for the successful religious play.²³ Almost all reviewers of the play were unimpressed: "The dramatic critics, except the *Church Times*, hated it, of course, because they have a fixed idea that theology is dull" (*Letters* 4: 37–38). The review in the *Times* was lukewarm: "This piece seems to have been written less in the spirit of a stage chronicle than in that of a pageant," though the performances were considered "unflaggingly good" (Hone 173). The *Manchester Guardian* review was harsher, especially criticising the presence of "'light relief' of the most banal and embarrassing sort" (4 July) (Youngberg 70). Later readers have also not appreciated the attempts at humour in the play.²⁴ The anonymous *Church Times* reviewer was much more complimentary: "The fact that the play did not ever pall, was not the least of its virtues [...] [T]he theology contained the most entertainment value ... Intrigue, warfare and the spice of humour kept the audience alert" (Hone 173–74).²⁵

Apparently the theatre-going public responded more enthusiastically to Sayers' play than the majority of critics appear to have done, justifying her judgement that theological debate could make good theatre. Sayers claims in her letters that the "theologically uneducated [...] uninstructed ordinary people who saw the play" (*Letters* 4: 37) were extremely appreciative of it, because 'the dogma is the drama' (*Letters* 4: 22), especially the "dog fight" of the Council of Nicaea (*Letters* 4: 37). Sayers remarks, "I fancy that for most people, the chief fascination lay in hearing, probably for the first time, a purely theological question argued with fire and passion" (*Letters* 4: 15); and "I find that all sorts of people to whom theology is a closed book and Nicaea a *terra incognita* were spell-bound by the homoöusios debate!" (*Letters* 4: 22; Lambourne 16). Sayers was evidently very proud of having pulled off the theology-as-drama challenge, especially to those otherwise unaware of such matters. She wrote that the council scene was "particularly liked by that 'common man' element in the audience which knew nothing about theology" (*Letters* 4: 51). This segment of the population appears to have been Sayers' target audience, as well as her helpers in producing the play. She was not aiming to please the tastes of the drama critics and goes so far as to say, "The only people who, as a body, did not like it were the dramatic critics, who are (if one may say so) a class apart" (*Letters* 4: 51). Barbara Reynolds, the editor of Sayers' letters, considers the play one of the author's "great achievements" (*Letters* 4: 9). Perhaps the local audience of the drama, as Colcestrians, would have welcomed more than the critics did a play that focused on their local identities, even if it did delve into rather dogmatic territory. On the other hand, when an abbreviated version of the play featuring only its second half was

performed in London after the festival (in February 1952) it appears to have been just as popular with audiences (Lambourne 17). The Council of Nicaea scene was considered the “‘best theatre’ in the whole play” (*Letters* 4: 51).

Precisely why audiences were able to identify with and appreciate this sort of drama is difficult to account for, unless one extrapolates the local Colcestrian pride or interest in a purportedly local Helena to a broader British interest in her presentation as a countrywoman. Sayers appears to have gauged her immediate public well in her selection of this topic and packaging of it within a legendary framework of specific local interest. Clearly, the subject and its deployment were temporally and culturally specific. The manner of speech, interest of the characters, and their expressed sensibilities are all very much of Sayers’ own era and class. She had a very particular audience in mind for her play, which happens to have coincided fairly closely with the immediate actual audience, but which could not be replicated at greater distance. This ephemeral applicability is understandable for occasional drama produced under the close and enthusiastic supervision of the playwright acting under almost evangelical zeal to get her message across to the “common man” who might enjoy the legendary framework.

In Sayers’ *Constantine*, Helena’s legendary British origins are exploited specifically to suit the intended venue of the play, the Colchester Festival, where “an ancient and respectable tradition” (Sayers, Preface 7) would be accepted as a reliable version of events, even if half-acknowledged as a myth. A British Helena is also used as a means of providing the emperor with a Christian rather than a pagan upbringing, an important element in Sayers’ scheme of exploring the rise of Christianity as an official religion of the Roman Empire. But the connection between legend and history is not seamless. The introduction of the prophetic King Coel, along with his three fiddlers, in a work so profoundly concerned with Christology (the play closes with Constantine’s baptism and a recitation of the Nicene Creed)²⁶ may seem slightly and unintentionally absurd to the modern reader in its implied juxtaposition of nursery rhyme and prayer. On the other hand, the original Colchester audience apparently took their connection with King Cole very seriously, so the sombre but dramatic finish to the play might have been more on key that it seems today and the play’s different registers more coherently integrated. The exact wording of the creed and the theological implications of the Trinitarian model it enunciates have been of central interest in the play, so it seems fittingly dramatic to end with a recitation of it just after Constantine’s deathbed baptism.

Similarly hard to reconcile with the serious tone of the piece are Helena’s (very dated-sounding) fluttering in the opening scene (“We must be brave and sensible. Is my veil in order?” [15]) and Flavius’s self-deprecation (“Helena – if you know what a lout I feel” [17]), though perhaps these elements, like the barbershop brawl, are provided for light relief, or at least to make the ancient characters more familiar and human. The tenderness shown by Flavius

towards Helena in the opening scene (“I have never ceased to love you” [17]) was invented by Sayers, and if not humorous, does have the advantage of contributing to the sympathetic presentation of the virtuous Helena who deflects the discussion to religion. It also allows Constantine to be the child of a loving and morally sound couple, positioning him suitably to take on the role of Christian emperor.

Perhaps because of these anachronistic modifications, Sayers has successfully integrated the British Helena legend into her account of the Council of Nicaea and the legitimization of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Even if her play was successful only as an occasional piece, it served its immediate purpose of celebrating Colchester’s legendary history, which Sayers considered “part of the game” (*Letters* 4: 393). The Helena legend invites the audience into this game and fuels its own sense of local relevance.

Sayers constructed herself as a religious dramatist and was certainly motivated by a desire to explore and communicate Christian theology in her combination of dogma and drama, a marriage that seems to have appealed to the play’s audiences in Colchester and London (it has not, to my knowledge, been performed since). Although Sayers was wary of preaching in her plays, she did endeavour to make her characters enact her ideas (Dale, *Man Born* 82). Clearly, she was willing to use historical sources and legendary material selectively to shape the kind of drama she wanted, and this was all very consciously done. In her letter to James, Sayers explains that she had to “take liberties with the baptism scene,” admits that she “invented my own explanation for the killing of Crispus and Fausta,” and allowed Helena to use an anachronistic prayer (*Letters* 4: 38).

Dorothy L. Sayers was excited by her choice of subject matter for *The Emperor Constantine*, as well she might be: the powerful forces of history and legend together provided both the means of invoking a legendary connection with the chief venue for the play, Colchester, and deploying historical details about a key period in ecclesiastical history, the reign of the first Christian emperor. By her own estimation, she had achieved, through her idiosyncratic synthesis and deployment of material, the success that Constantine claims the heretic Arius is said to possess: “A man who can get the women and the working classes into a state of excitement about philosophy must be a pretty fine publicist” (98). The Colchester legend was the means of bringing theology to the public, Sayers’ deployment of it in all its anachronistic glory and Byzantine visual splendour the framework for making drama from theology.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to express my appreciation for the graciously helpful suggestions and patience of Joanne Tompkins and the advice given by the two anonymous readers for *Modern Drama*.

- 2 Of these attributes, her relationship to Constantine is historically accurate; the other two derive from different cycles of legends concerning this important saint of the Christian Church. On Helena, see Drijvers, *Helena Augusta*; on the British legend, see Harbus.
- 3 Performed at the Playhouse Theatre (capacity 2000), Colchester, 3–14 July 1951, and published in London with the subtitle *A Chronicle* the same year. The second half (Act Three to the end) was extracted and co-directed by Sayers (with Graham Suter) under a new title reflecting its thematic orientation, *Christ's Emperor*, in London at St Thomas's Church in Regent Street, performed 4–23 February 1952 (*Letters* 4: 22, note 4, and 4: 37). Norah Lambourne observes that the second run was suspended by the period of mourning for King George VI (17).
- 4 See *Letters* 4: 2–3. The earlier festival plays were *The Zeal of Thy House* for Canterbury in 1937, *The Devil to Pay* for Canterbury in 1939, and *The Just Vengeance* for Lichfield in 1946. Sayers' secular dramas, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) and *Love All* (1940), have been discussed recently by Eads.
- 5 *He That Should Come* (1938) completes the list. The religious drama is published as a collection: *Four Sacred Plays*. See William Reynolds.
- 6 See Alföldi, *passim*, and Barnes 48–53.
- 7 Nicene Creed. Despite the success of the orthodox side at Nicaea, Arianism continued to flourish as a Christian heresy throughout the rest of the fourth century, though in her play, Sayers treats the matter as settled.
- 8 Waugh's novel was published in London in 1950. See Alamichel; Drijvers, "Evelyn Waugh"; and Harbus 134–38.
- 9 Letter to Professor Jacques Barzun, 18 December 1951 (Waugh *Letters* 361); and letter to Lady Mary Lygon, 4 February 1946 (Waugh *Letters* 223).
- 10 Scholars have not paid much attention to *The Emperor Constantine*. The biography by Barbara Reynolds is typical in that it mentions the play only briefly (362–63). Similarly, see also the cursory comments in Brunsdale 191–92, Coomes 194–95, and Kenney 252.
- 11 Although Waugh was extremely pleased with the result of his efforts, he correctly anticipated that it would not be a popular book, saying, "It will be interesting only to the very few people who know exactly as much history as I do" (Waugh *Letters* 310). Readers disliked the anachronistic dialogue, and the "apparent incongruity between theme and medium" (Frederick J. Stopp review in Stannard 325), and were not engaged in the serious theological implications of the story. The novel failed critically and commercially because it made uncomfortably explicit some of the implicit themes of his other "Catholic" novel, the far more successful *Brideshead Revisited*, and lacked the satire his readers expected of him, which he provided in many of his other novels.
- 12 The origins of this myth, promulgated in both Latin and vernacular texts, is obscure, but certainly predates the Anglo-Latin writers Geoffrey of Monmouth and Henry of Huntington, who are usually credited as its authors.
- 13 On Cole Hen, see Bromwich 93–94; and Morris, where it is claimed that Cole Hen

- was possibly the “last regularly appointed *dux*” (213). This view is not substantiated by evidence more reliable than the tenth-century Welsh genealogical tables.
- 14 These genealogies include those in MS. Harleian 3859 (8, 9, 10 [seventh from last name]), 11, 12 and 19 [spelt “Gyl hen”]), edited in Bartrum (9–13).
 - 15 First published by William King in his *Useful Transactions in Philosophy*, in 1709. See “Cole” in Opie 134–35. Kightly challenges the idea that the nursery rhyme relates to the legendary King Cole of Colchester, claiming that it is about a Scottish king (83). See also Ashe 152–54.
 - 16 In advertising material, Colchester promotes itself as “Britain’s oldest recorded town” (boasting an eleventh-century Norman castle) and still claims Helena as its patron saint.
 - 17 See Sayers, “What Do We Believe?” in her *Unpopular Opinions*, 17–19, and *Creed or Chaos*.
 - 18 The Restoration dramatist Nathaniel Lee wrote *Constantine the Great: A Tragedy Acted at the Theatre Royal* (1684). This play focuses on the love intrigue between Fausta and Crispus and probably contains contemporary political resonances of the Popish Plot against Charles II (see Cooke and Stroup). Like Sayers’ later play, Lee’s drama was not a critical success, comprising an uneasy alliance of religious, political, and romantic themes. Although Helena is not a character in the play, it does make a single reference to the British legend in the penultimate couplet; curiously, it cites Britain as the place of Helena’s death as well as Constantine’s birth: “CONSTANTINE. And Roman Arts that British Isle adorn / Where Helena Deceas’d and I was born” (Act Five, scene two).
 - 19 Cf. the astonishment of the audience hearing Julius Caesar speak in their modern idiom in Shaw’s *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1898), at variance with traditional archaic speech in historical drama of the period (see Harben 23).
 - 20 The performance exceeded four hours on the opening night (Dale, *Maker and Craftsman* 144), though was progressively cut on subsequent nights until a tighter performance was achieved (Lambourne 16).
 - 21 On Eliot, see Innes 466–68; on Fry (*A Sleep of Prisoners*, [1951]), see Roston 301, and Innes 477.
 - 22 Sayers makes only a single brief mention of Waugh or his novel in her published letters, after the production of her play, in April 1952 (*Letters* 4: 41).
 - 23 As we see, for example, in Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral* and Fry’s *A Sleep of Prisoners*.
 - 24 See Weales: “The play is seriously marred by some terrible Cockney soldiers and by supposedly funny anachronisms” (176).
 - 25 On the *Times* and *Church Times* reviews, see Hone 173–74. These reviews are dated 4 July and 6 July respectively (Youngberg 69–70). Additionally reviews of the play are listed in Youngberg 69–73 and Harmon and Burger 201–2.
 - 26 The modern Western Church uses the Apostles Creed rather than the Nicene Creed at baptism (Burnaby 6), though Sayers understandably chose to use the Nicene form of the creed that has been the subject of the play.

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