CHAPTER 2

The Ethics of Fair Play

“The less love in a detective-story, the better. . . . A casual and perfunctory love-story is worse than no love-story at all, and since the mystery must, by hypothesis, take the first place, the love is better left out.”

—Dorothy L. Sayers

As a writer and theorist of Golden Age detective fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers devoted considerable attention to the convention of fair play. Her fiction and nonfiction provide rich records of her practical and intellectual engagement with the uses of fair play in detective fiction, with its affordances, its limitations, and especially its relationship to the strategies adopted by authors and readers alike in pursuit of a mystery’s end.

The notion of fair play has for centuries represented equitable conduct in contests. Its adoption as a central tenet of Golden Age detective fiction underscores practitioners’ self-conscious, deliberate responsibility to both flesh-and-blood readers and authorial audiences. Scholarship on detective fiction has sometimes referred to fair play as an ethical mandate in the relationship between author and audience, though in most cases the word ethical has been used rather loosely. Analysis of Sayers’s rhetorical purposes in her Harriet Vane novels can allow a fresh understanding of the ethics of fair play—not just as a professional responsibility, or as a recipe for a good mystery, but as a mechanism by which detective fiction can make ideological arguments.
A rhetorical approach to her narrative techniques illuminates certain key reading experiences those techniques prompt in her audience. Those experiences, I will argue, are primarily ethical in nature, evoked deliberately by the author in response to a political climate marked by partisan statements on both sides of the debate over women’s civic rights and responsibilities. Sayers, as one of Oxford University’s first women graduates and someone who earned her living by writing, was personally invested in women’s free and fair access to meaningful employment. That ethical investment, while influential for her early fiction, became a productive, decisive advantage in her later fiction, particularly in her novels featuring Harriet Vane. By applying the ethics of fair play both to her detective plot and to her feminist concerns, Sayers made the progression of her series coextensive with an ideological argument. I do not claim that Sayers perceived fair play as itself feminist; I wish to demonstrate, though, that the ethics of fair play should be compared to the ethics of the feminist argument she makes in her detective fiction. I contend that engagement with her mysteries entails a reader’s serious and prolonged engagement with certain principles of feminism. In order to accomplish her distinctive blend of professional responsibility and feminist ethos, Sayers bent and eventually broke a cardinal rule of generic convention, which allowed her to overcome one of detective fiction’s greatest formal challenges: coordinating a love story with a detective story.

Sayers wrote twenty-one short stories and eleven novels about Lord Peter Wimsey between 1923 and 1942. Her most prevalent and versatile technique in service of fair play was focalization. Focalization is a technique that renders perspective through narration. Usually, a focalizer is a character and/or a narrator whose conceptual or perceptual point of view is rendered through the telling. Focalization pertains to who sees, as opposed to who speaks, in a given act of narrative telling. In some cases the narrator is the focalizer, whereas in others, the narrator speaks on behalf of a character whose conceptual or perceptual perspective pervades the narrator’s voice. In the latter instance, the voice is attributed to the narrator while the point of view is attributed to the focalizing character.

More adeptly than most of her contemporaries, Sayers exploited a variety of effects on her authorial audience by manipulating point of view. After focalizing her first four novels through Peter, Sayers substantially altered her methods of engaging her audience when she created a love interest for her detective, beginning with her fifth novel, Strong Poison. Although Peter remains focalizer in Strong Poison, the novel tests
the limits of his viewpoint, skewing and often occluding access to what and how he sees in the novel. As I will argue, focalization takes on a new hermeneutic purpose as well as new generic significance when Sayers combines a courtship plot with a detection plot. Moreover, whereas focalization in the first four novels helps make them end-driven—it encourages the authorial audience to anticipate the mystery’s solution and the novel’s conclusion, as is customary in detective fiction—beginning with Harriet’s first appearance focalization prompts attention to the romance’s progression and the novel’s middle.6

When she adopted Harriet as focalizer in her novels *Have His Car-case* and *Gaudy Night*, Sayers complicated still more the consequences of her decision to introduce a love interest. Her ambitious experiments with point of view within the bounds of fair play became a formal means of promoting her feminist argument: she gave focalization in her detective novels ethical significance. Because she is a detective fiction writer, Harriet’s ways of observing, interpreting, and evaluating evidence of criminal activity contrast with the previous novels’ established context of Peter’s habits of mind. Without essentializing gender differences, Sayers juxtaposed Harriet’s mind with Peter’s, not only in the substance of their thoughts but in their methods and purposes of vision, their attitudes toward their respective vocational responsibilities. She stretched the boundaries of conventional detective fiction, not by introducing a female sleuth—for Harriet is not a detective—but rather by distinguishing between the strengths of mind of a woman and a man in the wake of Britain’s suffrage movement.

A social critique of gender roles in the workplace might easily be accomplished without including a romantic element; similarly, an ambitious generic hybrid need not tackle difficult ideological questions. Sayers goes yet one step further by making the romance between Peter and Harriet signify a larger question about how one balances work with love. Although Peter’s professional and romantic pursuits have some setbacks, his privileges—as a noble and as a man—comprise a status quo vividly at odds with Harriet’s experiences. For Peter, of course, marriage need not impinge on career. But as an independent, professional woman, Harriet faces a much more difficult balance if she is to accept Peter’s marriage proposal. Her investigation of both love problems and detective problems leads her back innumerable times to the same question, which is never explicitly stated but is fundamental to the series: whether or not feminist marriage is practicable. Can married couples in early-twentieth-century Britain be “fellow-creatures,” each with the freedom to pursue
Sayers explores the ethics of fair play in her achievement of two difficult balances. The successful integration of feminism and marriage proves just as intriguing, and challenging, as the generic blend of love story with detective story. The reader is prompted early on to adopt a set of feminist beliefs, at least for the duration of the series, as an extension of fair play. While Harriet frequently makes mistakes, changes her mind, or feels uncertainty, I will argue that the implied author endorses a more consistently feminist stance, and that she asks the reader to evaluate Harriet’s judgments and actions accordingly.

In letters and essays Sayers qualified her attitude toward feminism. Addressing a women’s group in 1938, she explained that “[w]hat is repugnant to every human being is to be reckoned always as a member of a class and not as an individual person. . . . What is unreasonable and irritating is to assume that all one’s tastes and preferences have to be conditioned by the class to which one belongs. That has been the very common error into which men have frequently fallen about women—and it is the error into which feminist women are, perhaps, a little inclined to fall into about themselves.” She went on to distinguish between the “right and the wrong kind of feminism,” the “right” kind being the belief that all people deserve “an interesting occupation, reasonable freedom for their pleasures, and a sufficient emotional outlet”; the “wrong” kind being “aggressive” competition with men simply for the sake of dramatizing grievances, with no practical gain (138; 132–33).

Critics who cite her distaste for political activism as evidence that she was not a feminist seem to assume that feminism must be political in nature; they do not leave room for feminism as an ethical position. Ethical treatment of all people, for her, must include granting each individual’s right to choose and pursue a vocation. “‘A woman is as good as a man’ is as meaningless as to say . . . ‘a poet is as good as an engineer’ or ‘an elephant is as good as a racehorse’—it means nothing whatever until you add: ‘at doing what?’” (129). She continues:

[S]ome of them (though not all) know more about children than the majority of men, and their opinion, as women, is of value. In the same way, the opinion of colliers is of value about coal-mining, and the opinion
of doctors is valuable about disease. But there are other questions—as for example, about literature or finance—on which the “woman’s point of view” has no value at all. In fact, it does not exist. No special knowledge is involved, and a woman’s opinion on literature or finance is valuable only as the judgment of an individual. I am occasionally desired by congenital imbeciles and the editors of magazines to say something about the writing of detective fiction “from the woman’s point of view.” To such demands, one can only say, “Go away and don’t be silly. You might as well ask what is the female angle on an equilateral triangle.” (137)

In both fiction and nonfiction, Sayers consistently upheld this practical, anti-essentialist feminist stance. She peopled her fictional world with characters who articulate nearly every point along a wide political spectrum on women’s rights, but as an implied author she endorses a consistent position. She not only validates women’s rights to education and vocation, she also castigates a patriarchal system (in a wide variety of guises) that squanders women’s potential. Because Harriet herself is not consistently feminist, these authorial positions have sometimes gone unnoticed. Sayers’s choice to endow Harriet with some of her own personal traits—the two share a profession as detective novelist, a distinguished alma mater, and (as some have overemphasized) an affection for Peter—speaks to her skills as a sophisticated thinker and accomplished novelist. Their similarities allow Sayers to comment implicitly on her own activity as a writer, but the distinctions between Sayers’s and Harriet’s ethical judgments are more interesting, because they provide the basis for the reader’s engagement with a feminist argument. Differences between Sayers and Harriet suggest that Harriet is no mere avatar; rather, she is one of many rhetorical resources at Sayers’s disposal.

Although many have criticized Sayers’s generic blend, few have theorized about it, and only one study adopts narrative theory as a methodology. In Why We Read Fiction, which takes a cognitive approach to narrative theory, Lisa Zunshine validates the rule against integrating romance with detective fiction, asserting that “the kind of mind-reading expected from the reader of the detective novel is indeed not particularly compatible with the kind of mind-reading expected from the reader of the story focusing on a romantic relationship.” According to Zunshine, Sayers gets away with combining the two genres only because “we understand early on that Harriet Vane either will marry Lord Peter Wimsey after a requisite amount of soul-searching or will not, but we don’t particularly care anyway,” since she has not asked her reader to invest
cognitively in the romance as much as in the detection plot. One way of testing Zunshine’s claim is to examine the kinds of readerly investments prompted not just by romance and detection but by fair play itself. I will argue that she requires the reader’s attention to the romance as part of her feminist argument in the Harriet Vane novels. Delineating how Harriet and Peter think—about both crime and each other—allows Sayers the opportunity to make an ethical argument through focalization and narrative progression.

The practice of fair play posed a challenge to detective fiction writers in relation to two types of progression. First, that challenge exists in real time, over the historical progression of the genre. All genres of fiction assume some overlap between real readers and authorial audiences, but the principle of fair play in Anglo-American detective fiction of the 1920s and ’30s depends on that overlap. Because detective fiction relies on writerly innovation and readerly surprise, and because authorial audiences by definition know thousands of secrets revealed by previously published stories and novels (even if their flesh-and-blood counterparts have not themselves read so widely), as the Golden Age advanced, authors had to anticipate audiences’ ever-increasing knowledge and sophistication in order to succeed rhetorically.

Fair play likewise challenges authors in terms of the narrative progression of any given story or novel. It dictates that authors use narrative progression to reveal pertinent clues, not merely forestall closure through divagation. As G. K. Chesterton puts it, “The true object of an intelligent detective story is not to baffle the reader, but to enlighten the reader; but to enlighten him in such a manner that each successive portion of the truth comes as a surprise.” Flesh-and-blood readers engage with detective fiction in myriad ways, spanning a spectrum from utterly passive observation of the detective in action to vicarious detection to competition with the sleuth. But the authorial audience of any given detective fiction, as a participant in the narrative progression itself, must be surprised and enlightened through the progression, according to pacing and opportunities painstakingly constructed by the implied author.

Over the course of the twentieth century, both theory and practice established the principle of fair play as the sine qua non of Golden Age detective fiction. Repeatedly, practitioners and theorists reiterated its precepts, honing to a remarkable degree the genre’s conformity to certain conventions. Prominent among these conventions was the mandate that
romance had no place in detective fiction. The question of why love stories and detective stories were conventionally treated as incompatible during the early twentieth century may be answered by a close examination of narratives that attempt to bridge the divide. A rhetorical approach to Golden Age novels that work to integrate love and detection can yield a rich understanding of that generic friction at that historical moment as well as a fuller appreciation of a novelist’s accomplishment—both theoretical and technical—when the integration succeeds. If, as in the Goncourt brothers’ reading of Poe, the genre of detective fiction is one that, by definition, requires “love giving place to deductions. . . . [T]he interest of the story moving] from the heart to the head . . . from the drama to the solution,” the prohibition against integrating romance into detective fiction would seem to be based on a fundamental, generic incompatibility, and one potential locus of that conflict, as I will explore in this chapter, is authorial use of fair play.

As late as 1929 Sayers avers in print that she objects to mixing romance with detection in fiction. Yet her 1930 novel, Strong Poison, depicts Lord Peter Wimsey falling in love with Harriet Vane, a novelist of detective fiction on trial for murdering her former lover. Sayers’s stated objection to the generic mixture is not that it violates fair play; rather that, with very few exceptions, love in detective fiction tends to be “irrelevant to the action and perfunctorily worked in . . . the less love in a detective-story, the better. . . . A casual and perfunctory love-story is worse than no love-story at all, and since the mystery must, by hypothesis, take the first place, the love is better left out.” Here her objection is aesthetic, not ethical. Elsewhere—before and even after beginning her Harriet Vane series—Sayers identifies other arguments against combining the two genres, but her various objections to mixing the two genres always come back to the same idea: that such mixtures violate one or more of the obligations authors have to their audiences, be they aesthetic, formal, or ethical obligations. Her lively and evolving interest in authorial responsibilities to the reader, responsibilities in which fair play was integral, figures prominently in her solution to this generic problem. Although her nonfiction tends to stress the implied author’s aesthetic obligations according to the rules of fair play, Sayers’s fiction makes clear her commitment to ethical obligations: both the implied author’s ethical responsibilities to the reader, and the latter’s responsibility to think through the ethical ramifications of the narrative—to read ethically.

One popular contention against blending romance with detection that Sayers never endorsed assumes that detective fiction should be the-
matically unified. It is an aesthetic argument, but one more extreme than Sayers could countenance. “A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no ‘atmospheric’ preoccupations,” claims S. S. Van Dine. “Such matters have no vital place in a record of crime and detection. They hold up the action, and introduce issues irrelevant to the main purpose, which is to state a problem, analyze it, and bring it to a successful conclusion.”

Roger Caillois puts the matter even more starkly: “[T]here is no essential difference between a detective novel and a mathematical problem. . . . Its interest, its value, and even its originality increase with the limitations it accepts and the rules it imposes on itself. . . . It is cold and sterile, perfectly cerebral. It gives rise to no feeling and evokes no dream.”

Whereas Caillois explicitly approves of “mechanical” fiction, Sayers appreciates the challenge of humanizing the detective novel. “The modern evolution in the direction of ‘fair play’ is to a great extent a revolution. It is a recoil from the Holmes influence and a turning back to The Moonstone and its contemporaries. . . . The Moonstone is probably the very finest detective story ever written. By comparison with its wide scope, its dove-tailed completeness and the marvelous variety and soundness of its characterization, modern mystery fiction looks thin and mechanical.”

From the beginning of her career, she strove to write novels that transcended mere puzzle-solving exercises. Although she recognized the genre’s limitations, noting that it “rarely touches the heights and depths of human passion,” she applauded efforts in the early 1930s—to realign detective fiction with “the tradition of the English novel,” with its “profound treatment of the larger emotions . . . and the great interests of humanity.”

The “most important development” of detective fiction in those years, for Sayers, was the “return—this time with the improved fair-play technique—to the Victorian conception of the detective story that should at the same time be a novel of characters and manners.” Chesterton voiced a similar view: “I will add that for this reason, despite the sneers at ‘love-interest’ there is a good deal to be said for the tradition of sentiment and slower or more Victorian narration.” In their essays, both Sayers and Chesterton acknowledge that Victorian narrative conventions such as rich characterization, atmospheric detail, multiplot progression, and sentimentality—although perceived by many detection aficionados as “literary dallying” and by modernist aesthetes as embarrassingly obsolete—may be a salutary correction to the detective novel’s “heartless” mechanism.
Sayers’s admiration of Collins’s techniques in *The Moonstone* affected not just her theories about detective fiction but her writing of it. *The Moonstone* famously coordinates narration by and focalization through a wide range of characters, a formal technique that allowed him to depict, as Collins explains in his preface, “the influence of character on circumstances” as opposed to circumstances on character. In her 1928 essay, Sayers devotes considerable attention to the “Importance of the Viewpoint.” She analyzes a sample text by one of her contemporaries, distinguishing the authorial audience’s varying degrees of “privileged” access to the detective’s perceptual point of view and his deductions. She demonstrates that even subtle shifts in point of view, even minute differences in the reader’s access to a detective’s mind, have consequences for their reading of the implied author. For her purposes in the essay, Sayers’s interest in that rhetorical rapport consists largely in the way it maximizes and sustains suspense. But the rapport in her own detective series hinges on a richer, more significant set of expectations for her authorial audience.

From the beginning of her series, but particularly after 1930, Sayers narrated her novels using various and multilayered perspectives. *Strong Poison* employs a greater variety of focalizers than any of her previous novels, so that pivotal clues are rendered through the perceptual and conceptual frames of several characters besides Peter. *The Documents in the Case* (1930) replaces Peter with an entirely new detective and is epistolary in form, allowing Sayers to juxtapose multiple first-person narrative perspectives. Although her next Wimsey novel, *Five Red HERRINGS*, reserves its ambition for intricacy of plot and does little with point of view, all of her subsequent novels feature experimentation with narrative voice.

EARLY in her Lord Peter Wimsey series, Sayers’s focalization through Peter is a form of fair play. She allows sufficient access to his mind so that the vital clues of a case are available to the detecting reader, but she prevents access to Peter’s deductions until the novel’s end, so as to let the reader match wits with the detective. Focalization, then, is used primarily as a way of suggesting, and prompting vicarious emulation of, Peter’s methodology in the act of detection. As Sayers remarks in her 1928 essay, “The reader must be given every clue—but he must not be told, surely, all the detective’s deductions, lest he should see the solution too far ahead.” She lists a few popular solutions to the problem—endowing the detective with arcane knowledge that permits him to make extraordinarily sophisticated deductions, for instance—but concludes that manipulating narra-
tion of viewpoint is the optimal strategy by which an author can be both fair and discriminating in the revelation of clues—without resorting to tricks or revelations of esoteric knowledge. Focalization prompts readers to inhabit a particular experiential frame, be it that of the detective, a witness, or even an extradiegetic narrator. Whereas Arthur Conan Doyle focalizes his Sherlock Holmes tales almost exclusively through the companionate Watson, Sayers prefers varying her focalizers, and thus the reader’s sources of information, as often as several times in a single scene.

In her essay, Sayers distinguishes among four degrees of focalized narration, listed in order of the reader’s access to the detective’s mind. In narratology’s terms, these degrees are external focalization from without (by a character or narrator witnessing the detective in action), external focalization from without along with audible remarks by the detective (again, by a witness), external focalization from within (by a narrator who reports the detective’s silent observations but not his deductions), and internal focalization (by the detective himself, featuring both observations and deductions). One advantage of shifting viewpoint is that it conspicuously affords the reader access to some information while covertly occluding other information. If transitions among the degrees of focalization are effected smoothly, the reader is prompted to appreciate insights available through, for instance, the detective’s muttered commentary in one portion of the scene, rather than wishing for more direct access to his thoughts. As long as enough of the detective’s methodology is supplied to allow the reader to emulate it, the reader will be busy enough generating her own insights that she may not notice that the detective’s deductions are only selectively available. Alternatively, shifting focalization may give the reader access to observations that the detective misses, and thus can give the reader a competitive advantage over the detective in their race to solving the crime.

A fictional detective’s methodology typically consists of two components: his strategic creation of opportunities to obtain information and his characteristic reasoning skills. Agatha Christie’s Poirot, for example, strategically relies on his outsider status as a Belgian in England, as well as the harmless appearance of his physical person, to defuse the suspicion of potential informants. His “little grey cells,” in which he has supreme confidence, allow him to reason by imagination. As one critic notes, “Not for Poirot the fingerprint or the cigar ash. . . . [He refuses] to go Holmes-like on all fours in pursuit of clues. . . . Not quite an arm-chair detective, Poirot nevertheless spurns the aid of science. He is the champion of theory over matter.” Holmes may do his share of crawling after clues,
but the most famous dimension of his methodology is, of course, his dazzling power of deduction. His sharp eye for casual detail allows him to make a wealth of deductions about people’s personal habits, from which he then creates larger inferences. Holmes describes his process of inference in “The Musgrave Ritual”: “I put myself in the man’s place, and having first gauged his intelligence, I try to imagine how I should myself have proceeded under the same circumstances.”

By contrast to these two standard-bearers, Peter Wimsey’s methodology is dependent on his class and social privilege. As a British peer, Peter uses his privilege to create information-gathering opportunities. Physical evidence is almost always retrieved by his middle-class assistants: Bunter, Inspector Parker, Miss Climpson and her employees at the Cattery. But he conducts his interviews in person. Unlike Holmes and Poirot, who charge fees, Wimsey detects for a leisure-time hobby, which means that his conversations with suspects and witnesses are always unofficial, and not coincidentally often more productive than Scotland Yard’s interviews. The people he interviews frequently know his detection skills by reputation, but even if they do not, they are nearly always deferential to, if not awed by, the nobleman. They usually share information with him out of some mixture of politeness, respect, and unguarded surprise. As an aristocrat he reaps the benefits of being both insider—a symbol of British excellence—and outsider—able to reason about people’s personal affairs dispassionately from his social elevation. Focalization through Peter allows the authorial audience—which is, like most of the suspects and witnesses, solidly middle class—to emulate his methodology by enjoying a vicarious assumption of social privilege.

But focalization serves other purposes for Sayers as well. With each successive novel in Sayers’s series before Harriet’s appearance, Peter’s disposition, hobbies, relationships, and characteristic reasoning skills increase the authorial audience’s sense of admiration and even affection for him. The implied author’s fondness for her protagonist, which is obvious, for example, in descriptions of his postwar, shell-shocked vulnerability, pervades the authorial rapport with the reader. Focalization is a means of prompting an affective reading of Peter’s personality, as the novels progress from puzzles to subtler, more psychologically realistic studies of the detective in action. The affective dimension of focalization contributes directly to Sayers’s goal of blending the detective novel with the “novel of manners.”

It’s important to note that initially, Peter’s romantic encounters with women do not contribute to an affective reading of his character; in fact,
those encounters are focalized in such a way to prevent a reader’s sentimental response. As the result of heartbreak early in life, Peter’s relations with women in the first four novels, though always gallant and respectful, remain emotionally shallow. Sayers pointedly demonstrates that her detective’s heart is unreadable, both to other characters and to the reader. Peter’s relations with his manservant, family members, and friends are warmer, and Sayers narrates them more revealingly, which helps humanize Peter to a certain extent. But Peter’s emotional capacity is most evident in the context of detection. Sayers treats the ethical challenges of crime detection—questions of mercy, justice, retribution, and the class consciousness of an aristocratic sleuth—in part as occasions for suggesting that moral and emotional riches lie just beneath Peter’s rather vapid surface. Focalization through Peter prompts an affective response to his character when this internal complexity is partially revealed. But because Sayers tends to reserve those revelations for moments of crime detection, the affective consequences of focalization early in the series include the reader’s increased investment in the mystery plot.

When Harriet becomes the dominant focalizer in *Have His Carcase* and *Gaudy Night*, Sayers’s project takes a significant turn. Her use of focalization becomes more ethical than affective or methodological. By this I do not mean that the focalization is necessarily ethically admirable, but rather that its ethical dimension predominates. As I have said, Harriet’s ethical convictions do not always match Sayers’s. But Harriet’s methods of solving problems—be they matters of criminal detection, judgment of character, romantic conduct, or other myriad puzzles she negotiates—always evoke (if sometimes indirectly) the implied author’s norms about gender. The authorial audience is asked to make ethical judgments, not only about events but also about Harriet herself. Harriet’s job as a detective fiction writer lends her competence and problem-solving skills. She does not need to be a detective in order to assess situations and resolve dilemmas effectively. Peter applies his skills as detective to the very same situations and dilemmas, but to different ends. The authorial audience is asked to inhabit the separately competent judgments of both male and female focalizers and to adopt a feminist ideology through, and occasionally in spite of, Harriet’s viewpoint.

Remarkably, Sayers refuses to focalize through Peter throughout the first three chapters of *Strong Poison*. Although earlier novels contain a few passages focalized through characters other than Peter, as well as
some that are presented purely from the narrator’s perspective, those passages are exceptions to the rule. *Strong Poison*’s opening chapters make the focalization itself a mystery, as the narrator stresses the visual details of the setting and teases her reader into trying to deduce, by process of elimination, whose eyes we are looking through.

There were crimson roses on the bench; they looked like splashes of blood. The judge was an old man; so old, he seemed to have outlived time and change and death. His parrot-face and parrot-voice were dry, like his old, heavily-veined hands. His scarlet robe clashed harshly with the crimson of the roses. He had sat for three days in the stuffy court, but he showed no sign of fatigue. He did not look at the prisoner as he gathered his notes into a neat sheaf and turned to address the jury, but the prisoner looked at him. (1)

Mixed in with the visual details are interpretations and feelings, characterizing the atmosphere as ominous—“they looked like splashes of blood,” “his scarlet robe clashed harshly with the roses”—but such fearful receptivity does not sound like it belongs to Peter Wimsey, the suave expert in crime detection. The prisoner herself, who sits looking at the judge, seems a more likely focalizer. But Sayers rules out this possibility with her next sentence: “Her eyes, like dark smudges under the heavy square brows, seemed equally without fear and without hope. They waited.” As soon as the prisoner is described from outside herself, the reader casts about for a character-focalizer who would be both oppressed by the courtroom’s atmosphere and motivated to interpret the expression in the prisoner’s eyes. The next sentence supplies a clue: The judge intones, “Members of the jury—.” Immediately, though, the jury members are described from outside themselves, again in judgmental and speculative terms that eliminate them as possible focalizers.

Sayers makes her use of focalization conspicuous; she calls attention to the acts of looking and evaluating while compelling her reader to wonder which character is doing those things. For twenty-five long pages Sayers suspends that question as the judge (who is blatantly unsympathetic to the prisoner) addresses the courtroom, summarizing the story of the prisoner’s alleged crime. Her former lover was found poisoned to death just a few hours after they argued, and the prisoner had been researching that particular poison for a detective novel she was writing at the time. The details of the case, which normally would be leavened by Peter’s internal reactions, are instead directly quoted as a monologue by the crotchety, sexist judge,
interrupted only briefly and occasionally by the ambiguously focalized commentary. Sayers clearly designed this presentation to prompt certain reactions from her authorial audience. For instance, a middle-aged woman on the jury seems at first innocuous enough, but as soon as she is characterized as taking notes “vigorously” the reader familiar with other novels in the series deduces (on the basis of only one adverb) that this juror is Miss Climpson, a minor character and ally of Peter’s in other books (7). Moreover, the judge’s sexism interferes with his objectivity, gradually prompting the reader to find his summary of the case partially unreliable. In the guise of dispassionate description he implies value judgments that the careful reader—feminist or not—recognizes as unfair. Sayers expects her reader’s ability to pick up on her cues, not just to recognize minor characters but also to make certain ethical evaluations before Lord Peter Wimsey makes his entrance in the novel.

At last he does turn up: he has been sitting silently in the courtroom all this time, unnarrated and unnoticed. “The judge paused for a moment, and Freddy Arbuthnot jerked an elbow into the ribs of Lord Peter Wimsey, who appeared to be a prey to gloom” (5). Sayers’s choice of the word “appeared” again prompts her reader to wonder who is doing the focalizing. One also wonders why Peter looks gloomy—normally he is chipper, energetic, fairly superficial—and Sayers gives no evidence besides this hint that the trial has any special meaning for him. By the chapter’s end, we are provided with only one other suggestion that the narration is staying well away from Peter’s thoughts precisely because whatever is on his mind has a lot of significance. Peter contradicts his friend’s casual assumption of the prisoner’s guilt with “unusual acidity,” and that is all we are told (18). The word “unusual” again gestures toward knowledge the reader familiar with the other books in the series would have, while teasingly withholding the accustomed focalization.

Sayers never resolves the mystery of who focalizes the first three chapters. Instead, she uses its extended indeterminacy to heighten the impact of Peter’s precipitate and completely unexpected proposal of marriage to the prisoner (whom he has never met before the moment of his proposal). Peter’s proposal to Harriet takes place early in the fourth chapter. In that meeting and in all other private meetings between them in this novel, focalization is suspended; the scenes are conducted exclusively through dialogue. And although the characters’ dialogue implies some of their thoughts and emotions, for the most part, the scenes between Harriet and Peter keep the reader guessing as to how their romance is progressing, if at all. In their first meeting, when Harriet is less than delighted
by being proposed to by an awkward and slightly funny-looking stranger in prison, the narrator remarks merely that “his voice sounded hurt” as Peter concedes that the specter of impending execution may be dampening her enthusiasm for matrimony (44). He ascertains that he himself does not “positively repel” her and gains her permission to keep visiting, hoping that her answer will eventually change (46). Peter continues to propose marriage to Harriet, at respectful intervals, for the rest of the novel, and she keeps politely but firmly turning him down, naming her circumstances as the reason. We infer from dialogue that Harriet is ashamed by the way her former lover treated her in life, mortified by her sudden notoriety, appalled by the misogynistic press coverage, and above all, in a position of absolute helplessness. She feels more acutely than Peter does the power imbalance between them: he purports to be her knight in shining armor, but she wants only to be left alone with dignity. She seems to like Peter, but her circumstances loom larger than his appeal.

The novel’s scenes devoted to solving the mystery, which contain plenty of both focalization and direct report of Peter’s thoughts, offer the usual benefits of understanding Peter’s methodology and gaining insights into his character. This makes the lack of focalization in the scenes between Harriet and Peter more conspicuous. The prolonged estrangement from Peter’s thoughts achieves multiple purposes. First, especially in the initial proposal scene, lack of mental access heightens surprise. Second, it helps signal that the series has become a serial narrative. It suggests that in order fully to understand Peter’s behavior in this novel, one must infer his feelings and thoughts based on prior knowledge of his character. This effect is heightened by the novel’s frequent references to characters from earlier in the series, particularly those from the first Peter Wimsey novel, creating an undertone of authorial retrospection meaningful primarily to the experienced Sayers reader. Focalization in Strong Poison is more aptly termed contextual focalization, since the full effect of focalization in this novel relies on one’s first having read one or more other novels in the series.

The third consequence of denying focalization when Harriet and Peter are together ensures that the romance plot remain subordinate to the mystery plot. Although later in the series Sayers works hard to make the two plots interdependent, at this early moment there are good reasons for keeping them separate. In Strong Poison, the global instability consists in the detective plot: Peter’s need to find out who poisoned Harriet’s former lover. The sought-for resolution of this instability is not merely serving justice but, of course, saving Harriet from the gallows. Peter’s high personal
stake in his own success lends more suspense to the plot’s progression, but we are well aware that even if Harriet were to reject Peter’s marriage proposal definitively, once and for all, he would continue to function as a detective. The secondary end-directed conflict in the novel is actually not very much about the instability between characters—will Peter end up winning Harriet’s heart or won’t he?—even though that, of course, is precisely what one would expect in a romance plot. Despite the fact that the proposal scene seems to launch that sort of instability between characters, the scenes that follow it do not progress toward resolution. Peter keeps proposing, Harriet keeps declining; familiarity makes them a bit fonder of each other, but the reasons for Harriet’s refusal do not go away, nor are they very likely to anytime soon. The romantic frisson between them certainly qualifies as an instability, but it promises to be long-term if not endless.

Keeping Peter’s feelings about Harriet largely concealed maintains the precedent set in earlier books of depicting Peter’s heart as unreadable. But punctuating that discreet privacy with his repeated marriage proposals creates an imbalance between what the reader knows of Peter and the way he is rendered in *Strong Poison*. In short, narrative progression in this novel depends primarily on an instability (Peter working to detect who the real poisoner is) and on a tension (why Peter is acting so oddly, and more generically, why the detective in a detective story would be deeply invested in something other than detecting). Contextual focalization contributes extremely little to the global instability but a great deal to the global tension, helping generate the novel’s progression. The very fact that Sayers refuses to employ focalization in service of the instability itself contributes to the global tension and through it the novel’s progression.

One cannot explain away that tension simply by saying that Peter is in love, and that people in love act unpredictably. Sayers expects her reader to use prior knowledge of Peter to recognize that he is in a crisis. His customary poise has disappeared. His healthy sense of self-deprecatory humor has taken on a bitter edge. Abandoning his usual deductive powers, Peter intuits that Harriet is not guilty before he ever sees her, and he acts confidently on the strength of that intuition. Also, because Peter has previously claimed to have no interest in marriage or even in dating, we are compelled to wonder what it is about Harriet Vane that makes him act this way. Since Harriet’s character and appearance are never focalized through Peter, any evidence of his reasons for falling for her must be inferred rather than seen. Moreover, it is clear that falling in love has triggered much self-doubt in Peter: he starts to feel his age (he’s nearing forty),
he worries that he won’t detect the real murderer before Harriet is convicted, he recognizes that his titled privilege is not the kind of power that will help him win Harriet’s heart. All of these worries have the potential to revolutionize Peter’s character; they all suggest a complex subjectivity lacking in the previous books. This wealth of potential is not exploited in *Strong Poison*, but it makes character development in subsequent books more plausible.

Again, Sayers had good reasons for keeping the romance plot subordinate to the mystery plot. She renders Peter falling in love in order to create distance between him and the reader, to upset the reader’s expectations based on previous novels, and to emphasize this novel’s relation to the rest of the series. What this added up to was an opportunity to test the limits of her genre.

By her own account, Sayers had yet another reason for rendering Peter as she did in this novel. In an essay, she attests that she had intended to end her series by marrying Peter off at the end of *Strong Poison*, but found in the course of writing it that “I had landed my two chief puppets in a situation where, according to all the conventional rules of detective fiction, they should have had nothing to do but fall into one another’s arms; but they would not do it, and that for a very good reason. When I looked at the situation I saw that it was in every respect false and degrading; and the puppets had somehow got just so much flesh and blood in them that I could not force them to accept it without shocking myself.”

If this account is accurate, my hypothesis is that Sayers originally designed the novel to progress through two instabilities: the mystery plot and the romance plot. She could have ended her series by letting the romance plot supersede the mystery plot in this final novel. When she realized that she had put Harriet and Peter into a “false and degrading” position, however, she deemphasized the romantic instability and created a tension with her implied reader. She kept the initial launch—Peter’s abrupt proposal in the jail cell—but then instead of letting the romance plot progress, she developed tension through her narration, particularly by disrupting her normal patterns of focalization, thus destabilizing one of the customary strategies of her career author.

My examination of the only extant manuscript of *Strong Poison* supplies a bit more information. Sayers revised her handwritten manuscript very sparingly, and neither of the first two meetings between Harriet and Peter reveal any revisions whatsoever. The most substantial changes in the early chapters are in service of fair play. She heightens the precision of details about the murder victim’s last dinner (“poured the wine” becomes
“decanted from a fresh bottle at the table,” for example) and endows a typewriter with some obligatory, distinctive flaws (“a Woodstock machine, with a chipped lower-case p and an A slightly out of alignment”). At the point of Harriet and Peter’s third meeting, however, the manuscript reveals a dramatic revision. “Wimsey ground his teeth and went down to Halloway Gaol, where he very nearly made a jealous exhibition of himself. . . . ‘What is it you really want?’ he dem” The rest of the page has been torn away. The following page begins, in smooth penmanship with no revisions, with Peter and Harriet’s conversation exactly as it appears in the printed book. If the manuscript reveals any truth to Sayers’s claim that she changed her mind mid-novel, this is surely the moment of revelation, but with the majority of the page missing, the evidence is scant. The deleted line of dialogue adumbrates an emotionally fraught scene, but the printed text provides a rational and relatively poised conversation, again free of thought report and focalization. The chapter ends with an emphatic return to the detection plot, with an overt gesture of fair play: “He read the letter again, mechanically noting that it was typed on a Woodstock machine, with a chipped lower case p, and a capital A that was out of alignment. Suddenly he woke up and read it a third time, noticing by no means mechanically, the chipped p and the irregular capital A. . . . For the first time, in this annoying case, he felt the vague stirring of the waters as a living idea emerged slowly and darkly from the innermost deeps of his mind” (129–30). In this brief passage, Sayers temporarily employs focalization in the method customary of previous books in her series, though in short supply in this novel: external focalization from within provides Peter’s observations without having to reveal his deductions.

A rhetorical reading of the published novel (which is identical to the holograph manuscript) reveals that the global tension cooperates with the global instability from the novel’s outset; Sayers did not evidently go back and revise either mechanism of progression after penning her lovers’ third meeting. But notably, after Harriet and Peter’s third meeting the tension between implied author and authorial audience over Peter’s unaccountable behavior gains greater prominence, as well as hermeneutic significance. The tension’s new prominence suggests that Sayers may well have changed her mind, deciding not to force competition between her two instabilities and preferring instead to enhance her authorial audience’s appreciation of the generic experiment by emphasizing tension.

Seeking corroboration for Sayers’s “infanticidal” intentions, many scholars have pointed to two scenes in which Sayers efficiently summarizes the love story’s potential to unseat the detective story’s primacy:
“For the first time, too, he doubted his own power to carry through what he had undertaken. His personal feelings had been involved before this in his investigations, but they had never before clouded his mind. He was fumbling—grasping uncertainly here and there at fugitive and mocking possibilities. He asked questions at random, doubtful of his object, and the shortness of the time, which would once have stimulated, now frightened and confused him” (90). A few chapters later, we find Peter “[grinding] his teeth and [raging] helplessly, striding about the suave, wealthy, futile room,” feeling tempted to smash his own reflection in a grand mirror because, unless he acts quickly, Harriet will likely soon be convicted of murder (168). These scenes are typically paired and quoted as evidence of Sayers’ acknowledgment that the love story in Strong Poison was designed to end the series. Gayle Wald makes much of Peter’s frustration and self-doubt as signals of the “excesses of desire,” worrying that, “[t]hough the murder mystery has a solution that can be arrived at through careful reasoning, the love story remains dangerous because unsolvable, frightening because its origin is in the individual psyche, beyond even the lover’s conscious control.” Thus, romance is at odds with detection because detective fiction “cannot exist without the repression or containment of desire in a simple exchange between detective and criminal.” Although the moment of self-doubt is certainly unusual for Peter, and his disorientation is clearly attributed to his love for Harriet, my reading of the novel’s progression leads me to believe that the scene is less momentous, less indicative that Peter’s career is on the brink of collapse, than it has been perceived to be. Wald and others extrapolate from it to claim that Peter makes methodological mistakes, but Strong Poison offers no evidence of any actual mistakes—merely his worry about their potential.

Peter’s self-doubt has much more in common rhetorically with the deleted conversation than it does with anything subsequent to the deletion. Histrionics, such as smashing mirrors and demanding “What is it you really want?” belong to an end-driven romantic instability, one that speeds towards its conclusion of either joyous reconciliation or heartbreak. In choosing to downplay the romantic instability in favor of the detection instability and the global tension, Sayers belies her purported “infanticidal” intentions. Peter’s recognition of the chipped lowercase p at the conclusion of his third meeting with Harriet reinvigorates the global instability (the detection plot), and although Sayers’s hero does not regain his self-assurance until she resolves the global tension in the last lines of the novel, after the deleted scene Sayers heightens the importance of the tension through unconventional focalization. Of the remaining
twelve chapters in *Strong Poison*, only one contains any focalization by Peter. Seven chapters are focalized by Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison, two employees of the Cattery who perform all the essential legwork to detect and trap the murderer, using opportunities impossible for Peter to exploit by himself. Miss Climpson’s detection is so esteemed by the implied author, in fact, that at the crucial moment of discovery her deductions are elided (221), although her observations are supplied incessantly by either internal focalization (in her letters) or external focalization from within by the narrator. All revelations pertinent to the mystery’s solution are delivered exclusively through dialogue except for one last instance of perceptual focalization, as Bunter reads the titles of the books that have prompted Peter’s solution of the mystery. Again, Sayers reveals what a character sees without revealing what he deduces.

*Strong Poison* culminates in a dramatic resolution of the mystery plot. With truly virtuosic self-assurance Peter detects the murderer and traps him in a nefarious web of lies. In between chapters devoted to Peter’s solution of the mystery and the springing of his cunning trap, Sayers sandwiches a very brief interview between Harriet and Peter, in which she declines his proposal one more time. “‘All right,’ said Wimsey, ‘I won’t worry you. Not fair. Abusing my privilege and so on.’” Although he says it lightly, the fact of his privilege manifests as the source of the new primary instability between the two of them. He is a peer and she a middle-class writer. But more importantly, Harriet can’t stand the inequity in their relationship caused by her debt to him. As soon as he saves her from the gallows, this debt looms larger than their class difference. Although both characters theoretically aspire to a marriage of equals—Peter has remarkably egalitarian views despite the conservative nature of his titled ancestry—neither of them can see a way of getting past this inequity. By the novel’s end, Sayers has maneuvered so that at last her romance plot has the potential to compete with future mystery plots.

The resolution of the tension between implied author and authorial audience, in the final lines of the novel, manifests in Peter’s revelation to the duke that he is in love with a middle-class woman. The conversation marks his decision to stop hiding his feelings, from the Duke and likewise the reader, and to continue trying to win Harriet’s heart—“If she’ll have me,” says Peter (261). His willingness by novel’s end to pursue both love and detection openly and simultaneously is a resolution to *Strong Poison*’s tension as well as the long-deferred launch of the romantic instability with global proportions. The duke is appalled by Peter’s news, but Peter is unapologetic. He reasserts his customary self-confidence, displaying
the wit and good humor absent earlier in the novel. With her light touch in this brief scene, Sayers offers closure to that line of tension, giving the romance plot the opportunity to mature in future novels.

THE SECOND NOVEL featuring Harriet Vane is internally focalized through Harriet, and that fact announces the novel’s bold departure from its six predecessors in the novel’s first lines. Harriet is on holiday, having slipped away from London without notifying Peter, depriving him of the chance to offer his point of view to her or the authorial audience. She soon discovers a dead body on a deserted stretch of beach. Because we have never had access to her mind, we treat this scene as a prime opportunity to learn something about her character. Just as Sayers’s focalization in previous novels habitually emphasizes Peter’s methodology, focalization here initially prompts us to compare Harriet’s untested methodology with Peter’s well-established one. Harriet first thinks, “What would Peter do?” and then instantly squelches that thought. The reader is denied a direct comparison for the same reason Harriet has rejected Peter’s proposals of marriage: Sayers’s regard for Harriet’s self-respect will not let her subordinate Harriet to Peter. Harriet is determined to observe and interpret this scene competently, but she does it in a way that Peter would not. Her career as a mystery writer has taught her to appreciate certain details that might, at least in a novel, be clues, so those are the details she looks for.

Harriet deliberately turns her attention from wondering how Peter would handle discovery of a dead body to imagining how the fictional protagonist in her detective series (Robert Templeton) would behave. But repulsed by the sight and “horrid halitus of blood,” she realizes that, unlike her protagonist, she may not have the stomach for examining a corpse. “Harriet felt that she had never fully appreciated the superb non-chalance of her literary offspring. Of course, any ordinary person, who was not a Robert Templeton, would leave the body alone and run for the police” (8–9). Thought report followed by internal focalization suggest that Harriet is no “ordinary person,” since her professional knowledge leads her to see and think about crime in an experienced and informed manner—and yet, we realize, as Harriet does, that experience does not make her a detective. Although she regrets in this moment not knowing what a detective knows, she is spurred to action by something she does know, as a novelist: the tide is coming in, which means the body will soon be swept out to sea. Experienced as she is with coordinating plot details
such as time of death and timetables, she works against the clock collecting as much evidence as she can. Later, she continues her investigation in town: “Harriet wondered why she was asking about the trains, and then suddenly realized that, with her professional interest in time-tables, she was instinctively checking up the ways and means of approaching the Grinders. Train, car, boat—how had the dead man got there?” (24).

Here Sayers uses focalization primarily to demonstrate methodology, just as she does when Peter is focalizer. But whereas Peter’s deductions are typically elided, Harriet’s deductions are all narrated. Like Holmes’s Dr. Watson or Poirot’s Captain Hastings, Harriet’s amateur status allows her deductions to be shared freely with the reader, on the assumption that they must be in some important way inaccurate. And like that of Watson and Hastings, Harriet’s focalization provides clues not only about the crime but about her relationship to the detective. But whereas Watson and Hastings cannot possibly compete with Holmes and Poirot—their focalization underscores their subordination to the detective—Harriet’s focalization represents her independence from Peter, emphasizing her alternative form of competence.

At this point we can readily see focalization serving at least three purposes. First, because it foregrounds different methodological approaches to investigative work, focalization furthers the mystery plot. Second, as many have noted, fostering access to Harriet’s point of view helps Sayers achieve her goal of writing psychologically richer novels. Third, by lending dignity to Harriet’s alternative competence, focalization through her character advances Sayers’s feminist argument. Although Peter has largely earned his reputation as a great detective, previous novels depict his access to crucial information as a product of his privilege as a man, and a rich man at that. He interviews key witnesses in elite clubs open only to wealthy men. He recognizes a murder weapon as one of only a few straight-edge razors produced by an exclusive West End men’s hairdresser. He frequently makes deductions that a woman who works for her living could not possibly make. And yet, whereas focalization in the pre-Harriet novels allows Sayers to exploit the methodological opportunities Peter’s gender and class privilege afford him as a detective, when Sayers introduces her love story she begins using focalization to suggest Peter’s methodological limitations, particularly as they relate to class and gender.

In Strong Poison, Katharine Climpson, Miss Murchison, Marjorie Phelps, Eiluned Price, Sylvia Marriott, Mrs. Pettican, Hannah Westlock, and a female manicurist all have access to valuable information,
access that is a direct product of their vocations. Sayers leaves no doubt that without these women’s help, Peter could not have solved the case. As noted above, two of them—Miss Climpson and Miss Murchison—are focalizers, by virtue of the fact that they do some key investigative and deductive work that Peter cannot do himself. Their viewpoints are valuable not because they are women but because they are individuals informed by their particular vocations. However, the fact that they are all women calls attention to itself in the first Harriet Vane novel; previous novels in the series feature a more even distribution of female and male witnesses. The women in Strong Poison have specialized knowledge by virtue of their so-called women’s work, and without that knowledge Peter could not make his case. In Have His Carcase, Sayers takes her point a step further, using predominantly internal focalization through Harriet to underscore her opportunities as well as her limitations, both of which are often consequences of her vocation.

At a crucial juncture in Have His Carcase, Harriet and Peter interview the same suspect. By juxtaposing these two scenes I wish to demonstrate a different way in which Sayers uses focalization to promote her feminist argument, and further, to prove that she requires the reader’s attention to the romance as part of her ethical argument.

Peter and Harriet separately interview Henry Weldon. Weldon’s mother was engaged to be married to the murder victim, a sleazy, Russian-born lounge lizard much younger than herself. Weldon’s mother has latched onto the notion that Bolsheviks killed her fiancé. Her weepy fondness for the deceased and the foolishness of her Bolshevik theory leave her open to the sexist, condescending pity of other characters—an attitude that Harriet secretly indulges and that Peter finds tempting but appears to avoid on principle. Henry Weldon shows no such scruples. To Peter he says, “Thought I’d better push along and cheer Mother up. Stop all this nonsense about Bolsheviks. Won’t do to have her wasting her time with these tom-fool notions. Enough to send the old dear clean off her rocker, you know. Once they get these notions in their heads it’s a job to get rid of ’em. Form of mania, don’t you think, like women’s rights and crystal-gazing?” (145). In most of the previous novels, Peter is regularly given opportunities to bond with murder suspects through sexism: when a suspect makes a sexist or even misogynistic remark, Peter responds sympathetically with a view to eliciting information. Before this novel, sexism is just one among many themes Peter uses to talk to people on their own level, seemingly equivalent to discourses about motorcars, foreign policy, first editions, and fine art. This scene marks the first time in the series
Peter refuses to engage with a suspect on sexist terms, even at the risk of losing valuable information by alienating the suspect. His awareness of Harriet’s politics, and the effect of those politics on his chances of marrying her, directly influences his methodology as a detective, though this fact is left up to the reader’s inference. Ignoring Weldon’s jab at women’s rights, Peter returns to the Bolshevik theory, agreeing “cautiously that an unreasonable conviction might, in process of time, amount to an obsession.” When Weldon pursues his offensive theme, “Lord Peter delicately raise[s] his eyebrows” and says nothing (146). Because Weldon is a suspect Peter considers quite unlikely to be guilty, given his alibi for the time of the murder, we might assume Peter’s non-engagement with Weldon is a signal of his disinterest in Weldon’s testimony. To prevent that mistake, Sayers shows Peter a few minutes later drawing Weldon out through a politically neutral discourse, man-to-man: that of hunting and fishing (147). This scene is rendered mostly through dialogue, depriving us of direct access to Peter’s thoughts, which gives it even greater contrast to the later scene in which Harriet interviews the same suspect.

As Harriet’s scene opens, an unusually coy, tongue-in-cheek narrative voice reports that she has purchased an afternoon frock specially for the purpose of talking with Henry Weldon during a picnic. The curious inhibitions which caused her to be abrupt, harsh, and irritating with Lord Peter did not seem to trouble her in dealing with Henry Weldon. For him she produced a latent strain of sweet womanliness which would have surprised Wimsey. She now selected a slinky garment, composed of what male writers call “some soft, clinging material,” with a corsage which outlined the figure and a skirt which waved tempestuously about her ankles. She enhanced its appeal with an oversized hat of which one side obscured her face and tickled her shoulder, while the other was turned back to reveal a bunch of black ringlets, skillfully curled into position by the head hairdresser at the Resplendent [Hotel]. High-heeled beige shoes and sheer silk stockings, with embroidered gloves and a handbag completed this alluring toilette, so eminently unsuitable for picnicking. In addition, she made up her face with just so much artful restraint as to suggest enormous experience aping an impossible innocence, and, thus embellished, presently took her place beside Henry in the driving-seat of Mrs. Weldon’s large saloon. (227–28)

Focalized through Harriet, this passage uses Sayers’s usual mode (external focalization from within) to indicate Harriet’s detective method—she
vamps Henry Weldon to get information out of him—by describing her anticipation of what kind of feminine look will please Weldon. The first two lines of the passage also suggest that Harriet is considering how Peter and other people would perceive her dressing up for Weldon. At first it may seem that the first two lines are focalized from without, and that the adjectives belong to the narrator, not Harriet. Why would Harriet describe her principled resistance to Peter’s overtures as “curious inhibitions”? Certainly this and the next line are dissonant elements in a paragraph that offers an otherwise straightforward account of Harriet’s thought process. My reading, though, is that Harriet is ventriloquizing other people’s criticism of her. Although she is the focalizer, she’s imagining the way other people would focalize her. Harriet knows that people who have seen her with Peter might well consider her resistance to his courtship as nothing but “curious inhibitions,” rather than a serious feminist stance. She adds to this her uncomfortable awareness that trafficking in sexist stereotypes with Henry Weldon, using her feminine wiles to get information from a man inferior to Peter in every way, would make her resistance to Peter seem even more curious, not to mention compromise her reputation as an independent woman. Although this passage concentrates on her detective strategy it crucially demonstrates preoccupation with her relation to Peter Wimsey. It contributes more directly to the mystery plot than the romance, but it suggests that both romance and politics affect the fundamentals of the mystery plot: in this case, interviewing a suspect.

As the scene progresses Harriet flirts openly with Weldon, massaging his ego and encouraging his confidence in order to elicit information. She deliberately encourages his sexist condescension, deprecating her own abilities as she lavishly praises his, making references to how much more manly he is than Lord Peter Wimsey, pretending to agree with Weldon’s contempt of his mother’s foolish female ways. Unlike in the scene between Peter and Weldon, we have the advantage of free indirect discourse:

No—Henry was really too easy. Surely even his colossal vanity could not suppose that he had really made a conquest. Yet there he sat, smiling away and almost audibly purring. No doubt he thought that Harriet Vane was any man’s game. He really imagined that, placed between Lord Peter and himself, a woman could possibly—well, why not? How was he to know? It wouldn’t be the first time that a woman had made a foolish choice. If anything, he was paying her the compliment of supposing that she was not mercenary. Or, horrid thought, did he expect her to be completely promiscuous? That was it—he did! (232)
Throughout the scene, free indirect discourse and focalization through Harriet give the reader reliable access to her thoughts. At the moment when Weldon tries to force himself on her physically, though, the narration shifts to focalization from without: it portrays external events and prevents access to thoughts. This formal shift prompts the reader to reconsider Harriet’s earlier thoughts in a new light. Her terror leads the reader not to blame her for the assault but to recall again that she is not really a detective. Her deliberate provocation of Weldon, which contravened both her politics and her nascent romance with Peter, is so dangerous as to make her search for clues seem not worth the risk. By contrast, scenes that depict Peter making mistakes prompt the authorial audience’s sympathy rather than blame, because a single mistake by an expert tends not to undermine his authority. A mistake by an amateur, such as Harriet, tends to prompt regret for the amateur’s ambition: why can’t she just leave the job to the experts? Furthermore, by doing away with focalization, here, Sayers prompts the reader to make an ethical judgment. Her narrative form affects the ethical dimension of her rapport with the reader.

Harriet has reversed gender stereotypes by making Weldon wash the dishes after their picnic. “She ordered him about prettily and he obeyed with delighted willingness, tucking up his sleeves and getting down to the job.” But when he feels he’s humored her long enough, he drops the dishes and grabs her. The narrator informs us that “[i]t was then that Harriet became really frightened” (232), but otherwise describes her from the outside, refusing the reader access to what she thinks or sees. We assume she is frightened by his attempted assault, especially given the inequality between their physical strength, and that she has lost control of the situation she once ostensibly commanded. In fact, we are led to doubt retrospectively that she ever controlled the situation, and to regret her decision to use sex to try to obtain information.

When someone responds to her scream for help, Weldon lets her go, but instead of blaming him publicly for the assault, Harriet (to our surprise) explains that she has screamed because she saw a snake. Harriet’s motivation is called into question; is she covering for her attacker, and if so, why? Without any access to her thoughts, we are prompted to use what cognitive theorists (including Zunshine) call our theory of mind: to deduce Harriet’s state of mind from her actions. Her sudden apparent inability to control the situation suggests that she needs more rescuing, as she did in the previous novel when Peter’s detecting saved her life. Sayers ends the scene with no corrective to this suggestion. Harriet returns from
the picnic visibly shaken, and goes straight to Peter, evidently seeking his reassurance (though still, we can only guess at her motivations, as she is externally focalized). Such a scare could plausibly drive a young woman into the welcoming arms of a besotted nobleman. We are given reason to hope that, in a moment of weakness, Harriet will at last show a softer side to Peter. Again, romance affects the fundamentals of the mystery.

And yet, in the pages that follow, Sayers offers the reveal: Harriet screamed not because she feared Weldon would assault her but because, unbeknownst to the reader, she saw the tattoo of a snake on his forearm (he had rolled up his sleeves to do the dishes). The tattoo is the clue that ruins his alibi for the time of the murder, and leads both Peter and Harriet to solve the mystery. By manipulating focalization at the right moment, by blocking access for just a few lines to what Harriet sees, Sayers tempts her audience to assume Harriet’s vulnerability as a woman before reversing that assumption with a surprise. She also solidifies Harriet’s credentials as an investigator (if not detective), hinting all the while at the potential for romantic détente between Harriet and Peter. Harriet’s risk seems in retrospect to have been more than worth it. The scene comes to signify Harriet’s competence rather than her vulnerability, and it solidifies the reader’s conviction that her competence, like her vulnerability, is linked to her gender. Moreover, she has uncovered a vital clue by methods unavailable to Peter. In this scene, Harriet and Sayers have performed parallel sleights of hand, both of which validate a feminist ethics. Just as Harriet’s risk seems in retrospect to have been worth it, so has Sayers’s trajectory of readerly judgments, moving from condescension to admiration. In each case, we thought a woman was doing one thing when in fact she was doing another—and the other was a sign of her considerable skill.

Sayers is often quoted as saying that in order to bring Harriet and Peter together, she had to humanize Peter—she had to transform him from an improbable, two-dimensional superman into a man with foibles and insecurities. But she also needed to let Harriet’s sense of grateful obligation diminish. Inequity between the two characters seems fundamental at the end of Strong Poison. But one by one, each of Harriet’s accomplishments rectifies both characters’ sense of the power imbalance between them. Thus, every time Sayers draws the reader’s attention to the feminist politics of the novel, she furthers the progression of the romance plot without doing damage to the mystery plot. Even scenes such as the ones I have examined in this novel, which are explicitly devoted to the mystery plot and do not contain any overtly romantic elements, build the reader’s confidence that Peter and Harriet’s romance will eventually succeed.
GAUDY NIGHT begins with a nod to E. C. Bentley’s Trent’s Last Case, the 1913 Golden Age detective novel Sayers admired for its characterization, intelligent plot, and coordination of courtship with detection. A conversation early in Gaudy Night makes reference to a “liver-fluke,” alluding to a momentous conversation (in which the liver-fluke is mentioned incidentally) in the last few pages of Bentley’s novel. Shortly after this passing reference, Sayers makes clear that the question posed in the first line of Trent’s Last Case will be of central importance in her own novel. “Between what matters and what seems to matter, how should the world we know judge wisely?”

In Bentley’s novel, the question operates on several registers. First, the level of character: while living, the murder victim had seemed indispensable to Wall Street’s daily function; but after he died, “the world” realized that he had only seemed to matter in the grand scheme of global financial health. No one, in fact, much regretted his death, which turns out to be an important factor in the case. Second, the question pertains to the act of detection: up to the end of his career, Trent’s professional expertise permits him to distinguish what matters from what masquerades as mattering, and thus to solve mysteries most of the rest of “the world” cannot. Third, it underscores the difficulty of judgment in matters of the heart: Trent decides at a crucial moment that his love for Mrs. Manderson matters more than resolving the mystery (which had initially seemed to him to matter most). Although his decision does not preclude his correct interpretation of clues, it prevents him from acting on that interpretation. Mrs. Manderson herself later reveals that what Trent had thought mattered most (protecting her from “the world”’s criticism) had seemed to matter more than it in fact did, due to a misconception she then corrected for him. Combining romance with detection in Bentley’s novel means that what matters and what seems to matter are reversed and then reversed again; it is reasonable to speculate that without the romantic element, the novel might have been much more straightforward—but also impoverished. Finally, as Frank Kermode observes of Trent’s opening sentence, “the words refer equally to the difficulty of distinguishing what, hermeneutically, matters and does not matter in the pages that follow.” In both novels, protagonist and reader alike make deliberate ethical judgments that contravene the conservative status quo represented by “the world.” In both novels, the romance plot is integral to those ethical judgments.

Bentley’s question is echoed in Gaudy Night. “‘But one has to make some sort of choice,’ said Harriet. ‘And between one desire and another, how is one to know which things are really of overmastering impor-
The question in *Gaudy Night* operates in all the same ways it does in *Trent*: it pertains to certain characters’ behavior, to the act of detection, to the complications of courtship, and to the act of reading the novel. However, Sayers’s authorial purposes, which are unlike Bentley’s in having a feminist dimension, suggest that the act of comparing what matters with what seems to matter also involves both character and reader in ethical judgments about gender. Sayers’s novel captures a historical moment that offers more options than ever for women, particularly educated women. Given that context, the authorial audience is asked to appreciate the difficulty each woman faces of deciding for herself what really matters. *Gaudy Night* is set in Shrewsbury, a fictional women’s college at Oxford University, six years after universal suffrage was achieved in Great Britain and fourteen years after Oxford began granting degrees to women. If “the world” expects women to behave in certain ways according to conservative convention—one of the novel’s prominent examples is marrying and putting one’s family before one’s career—what seems to matter may easily be mistaken for what truly matters. For some individuals, Sayers observes, what matters most is one’s family. For others, career matters most, and a society that pressures women to subsume career to family can help cause those individuals tremendous unhappiness if not personal ruin. Naturally, the problem cannot be reduced to a simple binary of family and career; Harriet’s ruminations in the course of the novel acknowledge a wide spectrum of potential desires, ambitions, and priorities for women in her historical moment. Moreover, the question Bentley originally posed, and that Sayers adopted, was not simply about things that either do or do not matter; the priorities that merely “seem to matter” nonetheless consume a considerable part of a person’s energies.

*Gaudy Night* progresses through two instabilities, but unlike in most detective novels, the global instability is internal rather than external. Harriet’s struggles to balance love with work, to reconcile feminist principles with the wide variety of women’s actual experiences, and to examine fragments of entrenched misogyny even within herself, dominate the novel’s progression. The secondary instability, that between detective and criminal, is launched early in the novel but progresses very little until Peter appears on the scene three hundred pages later to solve the mystery. The global instability is Harriet’s gradual process of deciding what—in both love and the mystery at hand—is “really of overmastering importance.” Part of the reason the global instability is internal is that Harriet is, once again, not a sleuth. Hers is the intelligence pitted against that of the poison pen for most of the novel, and she is explicitly appointed the task of
investigating the crimes by the College Warden, but she is not a detective. Because she is a writer by trade, she records data about the case, compiles that data into a book, and studies her own text in an effort to identify the criminal. She does, of course, take steps to deduce the poison pen’s identity, but she openly “disclaim[s] all pretense to detective ability in real life” and accepts the task of investigating the poison pen solely out of loyalty to the college (78). The College Warden enlists her help because she is at once a Senior Member of the college (having earned her M.A. there nine years before) and a detective novelist with some real-world experience (the mystery in *Have His Carcase*). Because she is an alumna she recognizes how catastrophic public scandal could be to a women’s college. “The world” in the early twentieth century is all too ready to believe that a group of unmarried intellectual women are prone to “unnatural” and immoderate thoughts and behavior. Hiring a detective to ferret out a deranged member of the otherwise integrated community would mean exposing the college’s problems to an outsider and thus putting the college’s credibility at risk.

The other reason the novel’s global instability is internal is a consequence of Sayers’s concerted effort to coordinate courtship with detection. In her essay “Gaudy Night,” Sayers identifies the “theme” of both plots as being “intellectual integrity as the one great permanent value in an emotionally unstable world” (82). According to her schema, the criminal would personify “emotion revenging itself upon the intellect for some injury wrought by the intellect upon the emotions,” and the startling fierceness of this conflict would be mirrored by Harriet’s increasingly desperate struggle to decide whether her heart or head should prevail in her relationship with Peter. This theme, Sayers claims, is what allowed her to blend two incompatible genres successfully: “The new and exciting thing was to bring the love-problem into line with the detective-problem, so that the same key should unlock both at once. I had Harriet, feeling herself for the first time on equal ground with Peter [who is also an Oxford M.A.], seeing in the attractions of the intellectual life a means of freeing herself from the emotional obsession he produced in her, and yet seeing (as she supposed) that the celibate intellectual life rendered one liable to insanity in its ugliest form” (85). But although Sayers’s choreography of the twin themes of emotion and intellect figures prominently and consistently in the novel, a close study of that binary can’t satisfactorily account for the powerful ethical dimension of feminism in the novel. The novel’s thematic architecture, as described by Sayers’s essay, is impressive. But Sayers’s more significant accomplishment is evinced by Harriet’s focal-
ized judgments as well as the ethical judgments made by the authorial audience.

Harriet’s investigation of her own heart and the poison-pen mystery consists primarily of scrutinizing all members of the Shrewsbury community: students, faculty, and staff. Her observations and deductions, rendered through internal focalization, pertain as much to the mystery as to the romance. Because the poison pen exclusively targets female scholars who compete with or criticize men, Harriet is persuaded from the outset that gender relations in academia are at the mystery’s core. Her college reunion offers a sterling opportunity to ponder both mystery and romance. “As regards marriage—well, here one certainly had a chance to find out whether it worked or not. Was it worse to be a Mary Attwood (née Stokes) or a Miss Schuster-Slatt? Was it better to be a Phoebe Bancroft (née Tucker) or a Miss Lydgate?” (46). The women Harriet meets at the gaudy embody a dazzling variety of possible configurations of vocation and marriage for women in that historical moment. Some have sacrificed their original vocations and made marriage their job; some have forfeited the prestige of their Oxford degrees by becoming manual laborers alongside their husbands; some have intentionally or unintentionally let childrearing supersede their prior interests; and, in a felicitous but rare case, one woman (Phoebe Bancroft) has successfully coordinated her expertise in history with her husband’s in archaeology. Pursuing their complementary vocations simultaneously has required “dumping” their children “casually upon delighted grandparents before hastening back to the bones and stones” (14).

Sayers also examines relationships between vocation and marriage in unmarried women’s lives: some, such as the Shrewsbury faculty, have voluntarily foregone marriage in pursuit of scholarly careers; others have formed lesbian partnerships; while still others have remained single involuntarily, finding that their Oxford degrees intimidated and eventually discouraged potential suitors. Sayers expects the reader to evaluate each of these scenarios and to be dissatisfied with the ones that waste women’s potential for fulfillment. Some cases, like those of Phoebe Bancroft and the unmarried English tutor Miss Lydgate, represent positive outcomes for women: their careers thrive while their emotional lives are either moderated (Bancroft) or voluntarily subordinated (Lydgate). Other scenarios are far less pleasant: Mary Attwood’s and Catherine Freemantle’s formerly “brilliant” minds have atrophied as a result of deception and disuse; they are both married to men who find intelligence threatening. The history tutor, Miss Hillyard, is intellectually successful but bitterly anti-man. For
hundreds of pages the reader is asked to entertain Harriet’s assumption that Miss Hillyard is bitter toward men because she has not been so fortunate as to marry. Toward the novel’s end Sayers reveals that Miss Hillyard has in fact chosen not to marry, thereby correcting Harriet’s and the reader’s sexist assumption. As she surveys the small and rarefied slice of the British population who are female Oxford scholars, Harriet remarks (as do we) on the diverse range of experience, and on the substantial likelihood of disappointment for ambitious, smart women.

Harriet plans her own future with an eye to forgetting her mortifying past experiences, welcoming the idea that academia offers women intellectual fulfillment and a community of mutual respect outside of the bonds of marriage. “To be true to one’s calling, whatever follies one might commit in one’s emotional life, that was the way to spiritual peace. How could one feel fettered, being the freeman of so great a city, or humiliated, where all enjoyed equal citizenship?” (29). She relishes “that scrupulous and impersonal respect for a person’s mission in life which the scholarly tradition imposes” (136). She is profoundly tempted by the idea of definitively rejecting Peter’s proposal and committing her life to scholarship. She is attracted to the idea of pursuing one calling to the exclusion of all others. But she is also attracted to the fantasy that a feminist marriage, should it prove to be possible, would afford both vocational calling and emotional outlet—whereas scholarship, she concludes, lacks the emotional component.

Clearly, Harriet’s observations and deductions about the extended catalogue of potential options for women, married or unmarried, contribute to her soul-searching about marrying Peter, and they pertain to the mystery, insofar as the poison pen’s motives consistently reference gender relations in academia. But Harriet’s thoughts do more than underscore the thematic importance of gender in the novel, since she repeatedly entertains the Victorian notion that extended celibacy, particularly in intellectual women, is what has triggered the villain’s demented violence. As we have seen, she accepts the job of investigating the poison pen because she wants to protect the women of Shrewsbury from potentially damaging attacks from within and from outside the college. But frequently, Harriet’s desire to protect the community of women is overwhelmed by her desire to be protected from it. “‘Soured virginity’—‘unnatural life’—‘semi-demented spinsters’—‘starved appetites and suppressed impulses’—‘unwholesome atmosphere’—she could think of whole sets of epithets, read-minted for circulation. Was this what lived in the tower set on the hill? . . . Must one, after all, seek a compromise [leavening vocation with marriage], merely
to preserve one’s sanity?” (77–78). The authorial audience is asked to adopt, at least provisionally, her inculcated fear of demented female scholars. Although the fear is never endorsed by the implied author, the novel renders it just plausible enough to warrant the authorial audience’s consideration. Even the eminently sensible College Warden corroborates the possibility that female celibacy has caused the threat: “I suppose it might even be one of ourselves. That’s what’s so horrible. Yes, I know—elderly virgins, and all that” (79).

Harriet’s desire to protect the Shrewsbury women heightens the suspense of Sayers’s courtship plot, since it drives Harriet toward embracing the life of the mind and casts doubt on the romance’s comic ending. By the same token, her desire to be protected from the women heightens the suspense of the mystery plot, since it underscores how, over time, mere pranks have grown frightening and dangerous—not just to Oxford but to Harriet’s mental well-being, to the extent that she and other feminist women internalize such misogynist assumptions. “The situation was becoming a nightmare. Faces had grown sly and distorted overnight; eyes fearful; the most innocent words charged with suspicion. At any moment some new terror might break bounds and carry all before it. . . . She was suddenly afraid of all these women: horti conclusi, fontis signati, they were walled in, sealed down, by walls and seals that shut her out” (286).

Harriet’s fear also helps precipitate the romance plot, as it induces her to seek refuge in Peter, the rational outsider with the skill and detachment needed to deduce Shrewsbury’s irrational secret (365). Her decision to seek his help comes very late in the novel. In fact, Harriet knows from the novel’s outset that Peter has sufficient skill to solve the mystery. And yet, after her initial effort to consult him fails due to the accident of his being out of town, Harriet intentionally neglects to request his advice for most of the novel, believing that consulting him would be a betrayal of the community’s shameful secret (80, 364).

Harriet’s irrational attitude toward celibate female intellectuals pervades her reasoning and leads her to mistake “what seems to matter” for “what matters.” Oversimplifying women’s psychology leads Harriet to make a methodological mistake in her investigation. Moreover, Sayers’s fair-play mechanism depends on our following Harriet’s lead, first in her mistake and then in her enlightenment. After being compelled to accept, however warily, Harriet’s oversimplification, the authorial audience finds it vehemently (and persuasively) denounced by Peter, then soundly invalidated by late revelations in the mystery. The reversal of Harriet’s and the authorial audience’s false assumption provides at once a useful ethical
corrective—that asserts the dignity of the unfairly villainized spinsters—and a clarification that makes the real villain much easier to recognize.

Sayers goes to considerable lengths to make her generic blend in the first two novels heighten her reader’s attention to the romance as part of her feminist agenda, and to give the reader hope that the romance will succeed. In *Gaudy Night*, however, she offers credible reasons why the romance may not succeed. Peter has been proposing, unsuccessfully, for five years. Harriet spends the entirety of this novel preparing at last to give him a definitive answer. She knows that she values, above all else, respect from others and freedom to do her work. She also recognizes a strong need to identify herself as either married or single: living out of wedlock with Philip Boyes before the events of *Strong Poison* resulted in her feeling, even five years later, “like Aesop’s bat between the birds and the beasts”: a creature accepted in neither camp (290). Her discomfort with this extended indeterminacy suggests that, by the end of the novel, she will either accept Peter’s proposal or reject him for good. Visiting Shrewsbury reminds her of the value of intellectual integrity, of the pleasures and compensations of heeding a single calling, and of the fresh, unlimited potential she felt nine years before, as an undergraduate student. Although Sayers gives the reader no reason to doubt that Peter will solve the mystery, the outcome of the courtship plot is not a foregone conclusion.

Harriet’s fear that feminist marriage is not practicable, with Peter or anyone else, is plausible (given her past experiences), reasonable (given the historical context), and designed to be shared by the authorial audience. The reader may like Peter enormously but still cannot know whether marriage with him would be what Harriet wants. Sayers prompts her audience to share Harriet’s difficulty of envisioning feminist marriage and to be pleasantly surprised by its reality at novel’s end. The authorial audience cannot be ahead of Harriet in this matter; if the outcome of the courtship plot is predictable, the novel loses much of its pleasure as well as its ethical impact. Whereas *Have His Carcase* prompted our attention to the romance’s progression and the novel’s middle, *Gaudy Night* employs suspense to heighten our investment in the romance’s closure and the novel’s end.

One element contributing to the romance’s suspense is Harriet’s preoccupation with the notion of compromise. In a conversation with the eminently admirable Miss de Vine, a character who epitomizes intellectual integrity and the conviction of answering her calling in life, Harriet asks a question that, as we have seen, resonates powerfully throughout
the novel: “But one has to make some sort of choice,” said Harriet. ‘And between one desire and another, how is one to know which things are really of overmastering importance?’ ‘We can only know that,’ said Miss de Vine, ‘when they have overmastered us.’” (37). “If you are once sure what you do want,” Miss de Vine opines later, “you find that everything else goes down before it like grass under a roller—all other interests, your own and other people’s” (191). Harriet, who cherishes Miss de Vine’s austere commitment to a single calling, finds this an appealing and persuasive worldview. She spends the novel trying earnestly to recognize which one of her desires—work or love—is paramount. “I don’t think the compromise works,” she tells Peter, peevishly (68). She worries repeatedly, silently and aloud, about how to narrow her myriad interests to one. Mere pages from the end Harriet still wonders, tormentedly: “Could there ever be any alliance between the intellect and the flesh? . . . [O]ne kept the bitter, tormenting brain on one side of the wall and the languorous sweet body on the other, and never let them meet. . . . [T]o seek to force incompatibles into a compromise was madness; one should neither do it nor be a party to it. If Peter wanted to make the experiment, he must do it without Harriet’s connivance” (458).

In her essay “Gaudy Night” Sayers leans too heavily, as I noted above, on the overly simple binary of emotion and intellect. Harriet would seem to follow suit, distilling complex concepts into two-sided conflicts: work versus love, body versus mind, mad versus sane, married versus unmarried, Peter versus Oxford. Whereas the power of ethical choice (and the pleasure of suspense) in the mystery plot depends on the authorial audience’s temporary adoption and later recognition/rejection of Harriet’s mistakes, feminist ethics and suspense in the courtship plot both function as a result of maintaining our distance from this particular mistake of hers. We must recognize that her aversion to compromise, represented by her overly simple binaries, is an ethical misjudgment and rational miscalculation. It is conceivable that the flesh-and-blood Sayers endorsed such oversimplification of the global instability in her novel. But we can be certain that the implied author of Gaudy Night does not.

Harriet’s admiration for Miss de Vine’s integrity is understandable, but it leads her to dread compromise instead of appreciating balance. The authorial audience reads around Harriet’s limited understanding to recognize that the implied author champions balance throughout the novel, emphasizing how difficult it can be but how worthy of the effort. A wide variety of characters are depicted making errors of single-mindedness that must be solved through counterbalance: a student who attempts suicide is
rescued and rehabilitated, reckless behavior is curbed by a hospital stay, romantic infatuation is tempered with experience, Peter stops pursuing Harriet and lets her come to him. “If she wanted an answer to her questions about Peter, there it was, quite appallingly plain. He did not want to forget, or to be quiet, or to be spared things, or to stay put. All he wanted was some kind of central stability, and he was apparently ready to take anything that came along, so long as it stimulated him to keep that precarious balance” (396). Although this passage is internally focalized through Harriet, it does not represent the moment at which she comes to understand that she and Peter want essentially the same thing, and that feminist marriage with him is not only possible but also what would make her happiest. It is the moment at which Sayers most clearly shows her own hand in critiquing the limitations of Harriet’s understanding. She represents balance as akin to health for most characters in the novel, particularly her principals. In this, Miss de Vine is an exception, and perhaps less realistically rendered because of it. Harriet’s difficulty in understanding the value of balancing competing claims for one’s time and attention sets her at a distance from the implied author and authorial audience for the majority of the novel. The patience required of the authorial audience as we keep company with Harriet heightens our appreciation of her eventual anagnorisis and acceptance of Peter’s proposal.

The ethics of fair play in Sayers’s Harriet Vane novels largely accounts for her success in blending detection with romance, because she applies fair play to both genres. But this formal achievement, impressive as it is, may be considered a means to a more significant, ethical end. Sayers crafts several opportunities throughout the series for the authorial audience to establish, test, correct, and maintain ethical judgments about gender relations in the context of a politically fraught historical moment. This popular detective fiction series asks its readers to extrapolate feminist beliefs from those ethical judgments and to recognize its happy ending as feminist as well.