

Thrones, Dominations, by Dorothy L. Sayers & Jill Paton Walsh

reviewed by [Gwenette Robertson](#) in the [June 3, 1998](#) issue

Dorothy Sayers began *Thrones, Dominations* in 1936, but soon left it behind to concentrate on other projects, including a translation of Dante's *Inferno*. The book was to be another of Sayer's detective novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey and the fifth of these novels to include Harriet Vane, whose neck Peter saves in *Strong Poison* and whom he courts through five years of rejection, recounted in *Have His Carcass*, *Gaudy Night* and *Busman's Honeymoon*. The events of *Thrones, Dominations* take place during the early months of Lord Peter and Harriet Vane's marriage.

The manuscript Sayers left behind, which runs to 179 pages, sets out the thematic material of the novel and highlights certain nuances in the Harriet-Lord Peter relationship as important to this thematic material. But it does not set forth the mystery or its solution. This required Walsh to change the book's structure, since, as she observes, "the general public would find it very difficult to be engaged in a detective story which does not get [quickly to] the crime." Walsh was able to base her reconstruction on a letter that Sayers wrote to her friend Helen Simpson, outlining the intended plot.

"Hitler made me a writer," Walsh reports. "A war-time childhood . . . without quite enough to eat, with danger and some discomfort . . . made me convinced that books were the only really reliable things, and the only escape from fright and boredom." Walsh makes similar appeals to the relevance of fiction in the novel itself. *Thrones, Dominations* is set in 1936, when Hitler's rise to power began to threaten the rest of Europe.

This growing threat is only one example of the kinds of thrones and dominations the text explores. The title, taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, evokes the theme of power abused:

Thrones, and imperial powers, off-spring of heaven,
Ethereal virtues; or these Titles now

Must we renounce, and changing stile be call'd
Princes of hell?

Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Virtues, Powers . . .

Princely abdication is also present in the novel, as Peter periodically disappears to track down the renegade King Edward VIII on the continent. But the focus of the story is on the theme of domination as revealed by two marriages: that of Lord Peter and Harriet Vane, and of Rosamund and Laurence Harwell.

The Harwells have been married two years and are famous as the most romantic couple in London. They dote on each other in public and private. But Sayers and Walsh show other factors at work in their relationship. Rosamund's father lost his wealth when he was imprisoned for fraud. Penniless, Rosamund was working as a dressmaker's mannequin when Laurence rescued her by marrying her. He still sees her as his Cinderella. Cinderella doesn't mind the role--so long as she is always the center of the public eye and is seldom reminded of her scouring days.

Harriet Vane, in contrast, refuses to play Cinderella and is proud of her years of independence. She rejected Lord Peter for years because she felt that his salvific role in her life had distorted their relationship.

Sayers and Walsh use the image of a mask to disclose further contrasts between Harriet and Rosamund. M. Chapparelle, a famous portrait painter, requests the pleasure of depicting both Rosamund and Harriet. His request to paint the unparalleled beauty of Rosamund needs no explanation. As for Harriet, he merely says that he loves her bones.

Early in the novel, Harriet gets a glimpse of Rosamund's unfinished portrait. She notices that Chapparelle has painted Rosamund twice: once as he sees her, "tight-faced, frightened, almost . . . hard," and again as a mask she is holding, which displays the loveliness that all of London admires. Much later in the book, Peter informs Harriet that Chapparelle "could not have made any kind of point . . . by painting you twice in the same picture; you are unmasked all the time."

While Lord Peter envies Harriet's unmasked personality, he knows that he could shed his own mask only if he gave up his titles and wealth. "I would greatly have preferred to start shoulder to shoulder with others, or even handicapped," he insists. But abdicating his thrones and dominations is something Lord Peter would never do.

As for Harriet, she discovers that married life and financial security make her writing career harder. Now that she is no longer writing to earn a living, she feels she must justify her attention to so trivial an art form as the detective novel. But Lord Peter is sure of the value of her work. "Detective stories contain a dream of justice," he insists. "You offer to divert [ordinary people], and you show them by stealth the orderly world in which we should all try to be living."

Walsh reminds us that Sayers was a "raging intellectual with a capacity to invent and animate characters who have . . . the vividness of living friends." Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane have already outlived their author by 40 years and, thanks to Walsh, even survived her abdication from fiction.