

Ruritania by the Sea – Detection by the Seaside in Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Have His Carcase*

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ABSTRACT

Seaside resorts frequently served as locations of murder mysteries in Golden Age detection fiction, since these destinations could provide a diverse clientele, confined to manageably small groups essential to classic detective stories. The fictional seaside town of Wilvercombe serves as the location of Dorothy L. Sayers’s detective novel *Have His Carcase* (1932), in which Lord Peter Wimsey and detective-story writer Harriet Vane investigate the case of a man found dead on the beach. The location of the body turns out to be a source of confusion: while the detectives expect a traditional locked-room mystery to unfold (albeit in an open-air setting), the death cannot be resolved until the detectives realize that they are working in the wrong genre: instead of a clue-puzzle mystery, they are trapped in a Ruritanian romance, with outlandish tales of intrigue, unlikely members of the Russian aristocracy, and exaggerated and oppressive performances of heterosexual romance. (BH)

KEYWORDS: Golden Age detective fiction, British middlebrow fiction, Dorothy L. Sayers, Ruritanian novel, seaside resorts

“Peter, it’s queer we should sit here and talk like this. Do you remember that horrible time at Wilvercombe when we could find nothing to throw at one another but cheap wit and spiteful remarks? At least, I was spiteful: you never were.”

“It was the watering-place atmosphere,” said Wimsey. “One is always vulgar at watering-places. It is the one haunting terror of my life that some day some perfectly irresistible peach of a problem will blossom out at Brighton or Blackpool, and that I shall be weak-minded enough to go and meddle with it.” (*Gaudy Night* 269-70)

As crime writer Harriet Vane notes in the first chapter of Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Have His Carcase*, a novel that takes place in the fictional seaside resort of Wilvercombe, “[t]here is something about virgin sand which arouses all the worst instincts of the detective-story writer. One feels an irresistible impulse to go and make footprints all over it. The excuse which the professional mind makes to itself is that the sand affords a grand opportunity for observation and experiment” (*Carcase* 4). This temptation to experiment by the seaside is not unique to Harriet Vane, or, indeed, to Sayers: holiday resorts and seaside towns were beloved destinations in classic detective stories. These places might prove to be ideal locations for the oddest of cases due to the presence of the sea, as in “The Adventure of the Lion’s Mane” by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but, more frequently, the seaside resort’s value lies in its ability to present a group of loosely connected people to enact the classic clue-puzzle mystery, such as in Agatha Christie’s *Nemesis* and *Evil Under the Sun*, or Gladys Mitchell’s *The Twenty-Third Man*. It is little wonder that the seaside often featured in Golden Age crime fiction, since the popularity of coastal resorts, towns like Brighton and Blackpool, “alternatives to the well-established inland spa town,” increased significantly in the nineteenth century (Jackson 184), and this trend continued after the turn of the century as well: Lara Feigel notes that the seaside resort was especially popular with filmmakers and writers in the 1930s since it offered itself as a setting for “a world of heady opulence and excess” (15): the working classes were flocking to these resorts, leaving behind the grime and chaos of their urban neighborhoods.

Seaside resorts played host to a diverse clientele, from working class holidays-makers wanting to enjoy a brief foray into leisure and excess, through artists to more socially ambitious guests, who might have wanted to present an image of wealth and sophistication.

Sayers's *Have His Carcase* takes advantage of the seaside resort's fictional and factual popularity: it is her seventh novel featuring the neurotic aristocrat, Lord Peter Wimsey, and the first in the series where Lord Peter and his love interest, detective-story writer Harriet Vane, jointly investigate the death of a man Harriet comes across on the beach. As the detectives become entangled in the complicated personal dramas taking place at a nearby hotel,¹ they have to suffer the indignity of being at a watering place, which seems to be "vulgar" by definition (*Gaudy* 269) due to the gaudiness of the place, as well as because of its working-class associations. Their investigation is also hampered by confusion concerning "genres": the murder case, which appears, at first glance, as a simple clue-puzzle mystery, turns out to be the mockery of a Ruritanian romance. That is, however, not the only genre issue the detectives are grappling with: *Have His Carcase*, being the second Wimsey-novel to feature Harriet Vane, is also the detectives' investigation of and a challenge to the traditional romance plot as a means to explore the possibility of romance between the two of them.

Gender and Genre

While every volume in Sayers's detective series featuring Lord Peter Wimsey can be categorized as a classic clue-puzzle mystery entirely conforming to the rules of the genre, those featuring Harriet Vane evoke characteristics of other genres as well, as the constant experimentation with different genres reflects the struggles for definition in the relationship between Wimsey and Vane. While *Strong Poison* (1930), the novel introducing Harriet Vane as the epitome of a traditional detective story, *Have His Carcase* (1932) playfully involves outlandish elements from popular adventure novels—the so-called Ruritanian novels—of the

late nineteenth century, and *Gaudy Night* (1935) has Gothic undertones and can also be classified as a campus novel. The final installment in the series, and the one concluding the detectives' romance, *Busman's Honeymoon* (1937) is subtitled "a detective comedy," thus it not only bridges different genres, but different art forms as well.² I contend that in *Have His Carcase*, the evocation of the Ruritanian novel functions on multiple levels: on the one hand, the romantic adventure genre intrudes into the narrative, as Lord Peter and Harriet assume they are dealing with the sort of clue-puzzle mystery that amateur detectives tend to face, and their investigation is staggered until they recognize the workings of an entirely different, and somewhat outdated and displaced genre. On the other hand, however, the detectives also find themselves entrapped in unwanted narratives in their private capacities—especially in the traditional romance genre—that make it impossible for their personal relationship to develop before they take active control over their own stories. *Have His Carcase*, then, allows Lord Peter and Harriet to experience the realities of classic romance through the tropes of the Ruritanian novel and eventually dispense with the genre, on their way to create a narrative that can hold their romantic and professional passions.

In all of the Wimsey-Vane novels, the protagonists struggle to fit into the conventional romance plot and into the gender roles prescribed by that plot, even though the beginning of their shared story does suggest a traditional romance structure: *Strong Poison* introduces Harriet Vane, who is standing trial for the murder of her former partner. When Lord Peter hears about the case, he decides to investigate it, and proceeds to inexplicably and instantaneously fall in love with her. Thus begins their lengthy courtship, in the course of which Lord Peter, true to form, does prove Harriet's innocence and, at the same time, establishes himself in the dominant position of the relationship, as it is prescribed for him by the traditions of the genre. Critics have noted that the Wimsey-Vane novels conform to the classic romance plot (Greene Eads 215), and as Renáta Zsámbo writes, "[t]he love affair of

Harriet Vane and Lord Wimsey is also seen as a medieval romance where Wimsey appears as a knight who saves the lady from danger and disgrace and wins her heart by defeating all the enemies” (15). In fact, the tongue-in-cheek tone at the beginning of *Have His Carcase* already evokes the world of romance and Jane Austenesque “truths universally acknowledged” in the first paragraph:³

The best remedy for a bruised heart is not, as so many people seem to think, repose upon a manly bosom. Much more efficacious are honest work, physical activity, and the sudden acquisition of wealth. After being acquitted of murdering her lover, and, indeed, in consequence of that acquittal, Harriet Vane found all three specifics abundantly at her disposal; and although Lord Peter Wimsey, with a touching faith in tradition, persisted day in and day out in presenting the bosom for her approval, she showed no inclination to recline upon it. (1)

Harriet’s disposition in her current situation would probably win Jane Austen’s approval: she is an independent, moderately wealthy woman, starting out on a solitary walking tour along the southern coast of Britain, having just completed a bit of honest work. This walking tour inspires her to ruminate on the seductive qualities of virgin sand and the proclivities of detective-story writers, and when she notices a person lying on a coastal rock, she cannot help but approach the situation in a professional manner: “Now, if I had any luck, he’d be a corpse, and I should report him and get my name in the papers. That would be something like publicity. ‘Well-known Woman Detective-Writer Finds Mystery Corpse on Lonely Shore.’ But these things never happen to authors. It’s always some placid labourer or night-watchman who finds corpses...” (7). As the narrator drily notes on the next page, however: “Harriet’s luck was in. It *was* a corpse” (8, emphasis in the original). That is, in the

scope of the first few pages, two different genres compete for Harriet's attention: her circumstances and previous ordeals suggest an engagement with the romance plot, while she herself favors the cool, logical detective-story plot and imagines herself participating in one, even before she realizes that there is indeed a corpse on the coastal rock, waiting to be discovered. This dilemma is reflected in the first thoughts that pop into Harriet's mind after the discovery: "What would Lord Peter Wimsey do in such a case? Or, of course, Robert Templeton?" (*Carcase* 9), when Lord Peter beats Harriet's own creation, the fictional detective Robert Templeton to the crime scene, at least in Harriet's mind. Her inner monologue might, of course, seem like mere shoptalk: she is a detective novelist, after all, and it is only natural that she should recognize a setting ideal for a crime novel. If we consider the Wimsey-series in its entirety, however, we can find another explanation for Harriet's reluctance to engage in the romance plot. In *Gaudy Night*, she and Lord Peter discuss the novel Harriet is working on, and as Lord Peter is offering some helpful suggestions about solving a plot problem, he also points out that Harriet has yet to write the best novel she is capable of writing—a novel that is not a mere intellectual puzzle, but one that explores the intricacies of human emotions as well:

Harriet: I'm afraid to try that, Peter. It might go too near the bone.

Lord Peter: It might be the wisest thing you could do.

Harriet: Write it out and get rid of it?

Lord Peter: Yes.

Harriet: I'll think about that. It would hurt like hell.

Lord Peter: What would that matter, if it made a good book? (*Gaudy* 291)

It is hardly surprising that Lord Peter encourages Harriet not to shy away from painful personal experiences to fulfil her highest artistic and professional potential: all through the series we witness Lord Peter coming to terms with his own emotional life. As his uncle notes in the biographical note added to all the novels featuring Harriet, “[of] late, he has become a little more ready to show his feelings, and a little less terrified of having any to show” (*Gaudy* 445). Apparently, Lord Peter’s chosen profession is one that allows him fulfillment, but it comes at the price of emotional distress, since the resolution of each case and the responsibility attached to sending a murderer to the gallows take an enormous toll on Wimsey and evoke his wartime traumas. He is aware that it is the depth of his own emotional experience that urges him to conduct his professional life with the utmost care and responsibility. This is also evidenced by an early chapter in *Gaudy Night*, where Lord Peter and Harriet discuss whether people can be categorized as being led by their hearts or by their brains, and while they seem to be in agreement about who is who in their relationship, their division of roles is not one we might expect in the traditional romance plot:

Lord Peter: Should you catalogue me as a heart or a brain?

Harriet: Nobody . . . could deny your brain.

Lord Peter: Who denies it? And you may deny my heart, but I’m damned if you shall deny its existence. . . . You will have to deny something, if you intend to be like Cæsar’s sacrifice.

Harriet: Cæsar’s . . . ?

Lord Peter: A beast without a heart. (66)

From the beginning, therefore, one of the main obstacles Lord Peter and Harriet are faced with is the fact that they are reluctant to embrace the traditional gender roles offered to them

by the classic romance plot, since their previous relationships, in which they did take on these roles, ended in disappointment for them both. When Harriet gave up her principles for the sake of a relationship, she eventually was tried for the murder of her former lover, while Lord Peter, in his youth, fell in love with a “princess of moonlight,” a girl who was beautiful but not in the least his intellectual equal, and “he went in for his final Schools in the temper of a Sir Eglamore achieving his first dragon; laid his First-Class Honours at his lady’s feet like the dragon’s head, and settled down to a period of virtuous probation” (*Gaudy* 443). Afterwards, he attempted to prove his worth in the Great War as well, but by the time he accomplished his mission, his princess of moonlight had eloped with someone else. Both have been burnt, but while in *Have His Carcase* Lord Peter is prepared to try again and establish a partnership based on equality and mutual respect, Harriet is still unable to see the possibility of a relationship in which one or both parties would need not to compromise on their personal or professional integrity. Her hesitation is not unreasonable: since Lord Peter in *Strong Poison* establishes himself as her saviour and takes an immediate yet inexplicable fancy to her, Harriet feels that Wimsey is in love with her as his own creature and not with her as a flesh and blood person. Thus, she would rather become the “beast without a heart” and forego the proffered romance altogether (*Gaudy* 66). As Mo Moulton notes in *Mutual Admiration Society*, a work on Dorothy L. Sayers and her circle of friends, “[it] is obvious, by the end of *Have His Carcase*, that Harriet and Peter needed to reinvent marriage in order for it to suit them” (190), since the traditional template for romance and marriage they are familiar with obviously does not work for either of them. This becomes painfully clear in *Have His Carcase*, where they “are surrounded by grotesque exaggerations of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality” (Moulton 186) when they are investigating the complicated yet clichéd personal dramas surrounding the murder. Similarly, in *Strong Poison* they end up in just as

exaggerated and uncomfortable roles, with Lord Peter as the knight in shining armour and Harriet, the damsel rescued from distress, as his reward.

Controlling Narratives

I argue that the reinvention of marriage, for Harriet and Lord Peter, must come through the reinvention of romantic narratives and, in general, through taking charge of narratives involving the two of them. Indeed, the couple's entire shared history begins with the creation of narratives: when, in *Strong Poison*, Lord Peter visits her in prison, he and Harriet playfully brainstorm a potential detective story that they might go on to write together. One of the very first experiences they share is an act of creation and storytelling, which sets the tone for the rest of their relationship: as detectives, they are engaged in exploring potential stories that might have led to any murder they are investigating, but they are also writing their own story. Ultimately, the entire relationship between Lord Peter and Harriet is a long quest for finding the kind of narrative that can sustain them and keep all their passions intact. As Green Eads remarks, "Harriet and Peter laugh together and work alongside one another, creating a relationship in which each thrives personally and professionally" (222). This narrative may involve saving one another: Lord Peter valiantly rescues Harriet from a death sentence in *Strong Poison*, and in *Busman's Honeymoon*, Harriet fulfills a similar function when, after the murderer has been caught and sentenced, she delivers her then-husband from his solitary suffering by providing him with space to experience and share his own guilt—but only after reminding him, in the course of the investigation, that he should never let his affection for Harriet corrupt his judgement (*Busman* 308), and abandon his duty to spare Harriet's feelings.

In addition, Harriet is a detective novelist, and as such, she is an expert in creating and controlling narratives, albeit mostly fictional ones. However, when she happens upon the dead

body on the beach in *Have His Carcase*, her first instinct—after notifying the police—is to take charge of this narrative and use it to her own advantage. Being mindful of the fact that the press are likely to bring up her former lover’s murder if she once again becomes associated with crime, she decides to dictate how newspapers should present her involvement, and proceeds to telephone the *Morning Star*, offering them a story in a determined and brazen manner: “The discovery was made by Miss Harriet Vane, the well-known detective novelist. . . . Yes, that’s right—the Harriet Vane who was tried for murder two years ago. . . . Yes. . . . Miss Vane, who is on a walking-tour, gathering material for her forthcoming book, *The Fountain-Pen Mystery*, was obliged to walk for several miles before getting help” (*Carcase* 30). Harriet is painfully aware that her name mentioned in connection with death will inevitably lead to renewed interest in the murder of Philip Boyes and her association with it, and she chooses to control the narrative about herself by reminding the world of her past, with no intention of hiding unpleasant details, even if her actions might appear tasteless and vulgar at first glance. As she later explains to Lord Peter:

You thought I was pretty brazen, I expect, when you found me getting publicity of the thing. So I was. There’s no choice for a person like me to be anything but brazen. Would it have been better to wait till the papers dragged the juicy bits out of the dust-bin for themselves? I can’t hide my name—it’s what I live by. If I did hide it, that would only be another suspicious circumstance, wouldn’t it? (173-74)

Her unsentimental attitude is questioned in *Gaudy Nights* as well, when a fellow at Harriet’s old college suggests that she should probably stop writing detective novels and stop making “terrible crime and the suffering of innocent suspects . . . into an intellectual game” (*Gaudy* 33) now that she has had first-hand experience of the workings of the justice system. Harriet

is rebuked for being cold and rational, thus not feminine enough, and for prioritizing her professional skills, interests and financial gain, that is, for continuing to write detective stories, a job she does well and one that allows her to make a comfortable living, instead of exhibiting gender-appropriate “proper feelings.”

However, Harriet is not the only one at Wilvercombe who takes charge of the story that is told about them: the seaside resort is often a location where the rules of workaday life are suspended (for the visitors, at least), and people are able to reinvent themselves, as they are there for a limited time only, surrounded by others unknown to them, and to whom they are equally unknown. Even the Resplendent Hotel, where Harriet initially chooses to stay, and one that features heavily in the dead man’s story, presents itself as if it were something straight out of fiction: it is “one of those monster seaside palaces which look as though they had been designed by a German manufacturer of children’s cardboard toys. Its glass porch was crowded with hothouse plants, and the lofty dome of its reception-hall was supported on gilt pilasters rising out of an ocean of blue plush” (*Carcase* 35-6). Harriet’s first thought upon entering the hotel’s lounge is “*Autres temps, autres moeurs*” [Different times, different manners] (39, emphasis in the original), as everything looks not only excessive to the point of tastelessness, but dated as well with the professional dancers performing a waltz to the tunes of the “Blue Danube,” and the guests wearing “[long] skirts and costumes of the seventies . . . and even ostrich feathers and fans” (39), and everything is very obviously an imitation, an illusion of times gone by. The hotel is indeed displaced in time, as it evokes the resorts of the past: Lee Jackson, in *Palaces of Pleasures* notes that due to the transport revolutions of the late nineteenth century, the seaside experience had become democratized, as it became available to the lower middle and working classes (185). The Resplendent Hotel appears to be a relic of the Victorian era, an institution masquerading as a fashionable holiday destination, but under its superficial glamor, neither the clientele, nor the staff are as sophisticated as one

might expect, since the hotel, along with many other palaces of pleasure at the time, prioritized the appearance of opulence over the refined taste and manners expected by those actually opulent. Although Lord Peter never expands on his theory regarding the vulgar nature of watering places, it is not unreasonable to suppose that this perceived vulgarity is the result of the overwhelmingly working class clientele, and the hotel's attempts at covering up this fact with a glamorous façade, in order to provide the illusion of class and elegance.

The staff of the hotel are complicit in playing into the illusion, as the job of the professional dancers—often referred to as “gigolos”—is to support the illusions and romances the guest create for themselves. Paul Alexis, the dead man Harriet finds on the beach, was one of the professional dancers at the hotel; he is found to have been involved in several romance plots, one of which eventually led to his death. Evidently, the fantastical quality of the hotel—and that of the entire resort, for that matter—is its main attraction, visitors come here for the illusion. One of the jurors at Alexis's inquest implies that the man's death interferes with the resort's façade of glamor and romance when he offers the following suggestion on behalf of the jury: “We should like to add as we think the police regulations about foreigners did ought to be tightened up, like, deceased being a foreigner and suicides and murders being unpleasant in a place where so many visitors come in the summer” (*Carcase* 287-8). That is, all this vulgar unpleasantness—along with foreigners—should be outlawed in Wilvercombe, because it is exactly this, the harsher side of reality, the guests want to escape from.

A Ruritanian Romance

The death of Paul Alexis, at first glance, appears to be the open-air equivalent of a locked-room mystery: he must have died mere minutes before Harriet stumbled upon him on a solitary rock on the beach, since his blood was not yet clotting; however, there appeared to be no footprints in the sand (as Harriet observed before) that would indicate a murderer

getting away, neither did anyone witness a person approaching the beach shortly before Harriet got there, therefore Alexis's death is generally regarded as suicide. The plot becomes more convoluted as soon as Harriet and Lord Peter start looking into his life and relationships, and they discover that while there might have been somebody who had reason to murder Alexis, this person had an iron-clad alibi for the time of the murder. In the course of their investigation, Harriet and Lord Peter keep proving the impossibility of both murder and suicide; nothing is what it seems because they are working in the wrong genre: they are trying to interpret the events and clues in the framework of the classic clue-puzzle mystery, but the facts fail to make sense, since what the detectives are dealing with is not a classic mystery but an outlandish romantic adventure story. Harriet and Lord Peter jokingly reference this possibility several times, even before they realize that the confusion of genres is exactly what prevents them from solving the mystery:

Harriet: You aren't suggesting. . . that the weapon isn't really the weapon after all?

Lord Peter: I should like to The weapon never is the weapon, is it?

Harriet: Of course not; and the corpse is never the corpse. The body is, obviously, not that of Peter Alexis—

Lord Peter: But of the Prime Minister of Ruritania—

Harriet: It did not die of a cut throat—

Lord Peter: But of an obscure poison, known only to the Bushmen of Central Australia—

Harriet: And the throat was cut after death—

Lord Peter: By a middle-aged man of short temper and careless habits, with a stiff beard and expensive tastes—

Harriet: Recently returned from China— (*Carcase* 52-3)

What Lord Peter and Harriet fail to recognize at this point is that they are right: even though the dead man is not the former Prime Minister of Ruritania, but a Russian aristocrat, and while he did die of a cut throat, he might as well have died of a cut finger, since he suffered from haemophilia, a rare disease not uncommon among the Romanovs, and one that protracts clotting of the blood even after the demise of the person. That is why the detectives miscalculate the time for which the suspects need to have alibis. More importantly, however, Harriet and Lord Peter unwittingly find themselves in a Ruritanian romance, a genre that was very popular at the turn of the century and was still in the public consciousness in the 1930s, given the fact that another novel of confused identities, Anthony Hope's *The Prisoner of Zenda* was adapted into a film in 1937 (Goldsworthy 45), but, in fact, was as much of an anachronism in the world of the novel as the Resplendent Hotel, and it was also very much out of place by the seaside. As Vesna Goldsworthy argues, the fictional Ruritania "came to establish itself in the popular imagination as a Balkan land," and this can be attributed to the fact that "goings-on among Balkan dynasties . . . filled the columns of the popular press" around the time when *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894) originally appeared (Goldsworthy 47). A further factor also excited the public about the area: the possibility that the throne of one of these new Balkan countries might be offered to Britons (45).⁴ The plan to murder Paul Alexis in *Have His Carcase* builds on this romantic assumption: as Harriet and Lord Peter discover, the son of Alexis's elderly fiancée led Alexis to believe that there was a conspiracy to offer him the Russian throne, and, to that end, he was sent encrypted messages over a period of time—including photos of his future bride with whom he was to establish a new dynasty—informing him about the details of the plot, and giving him instructions about meeting a "Rider from the Sea" on the day of his murder. As Harriet puts it, this story sounds "like the kind of thing I should put into a detective story if I didn't know a thing about Russia and didn't care much, and only wanted to give a general idea that somebody was a conspirator"

(*Carcase* 392-93). However, this flimsy story was enough to fool Paul Alexis for the very reason that it was a story he was familiar with and had been imagining for himself for some time: Lord Peter notes in the same exchange that the story “might have come straight out of one of those Ruritanian romances that Alexis was so fond of” (393).

Paul Alexis, an avid reader of Ruritanian romances, liked to picture himself as a protagonist of such books. However, he was murdered because he relinquished control over his own narrative: when he came to the Resplendent Hotel, he was given a chance to re-invent himself, and he laid down the foundations to create his own Ruritanian backstory. As his former lady friend, Leila Garland explains: “Paul—that is, Mr Alexis—used to tell wonderful stories about himself, but it’s *my* belief he was making it all up. He was such a boy for romances and story-books. . . . Oh, no—he only said that if his great-great-grandmother or somebody had married somebody he might have been somebody very important” (424, emphasis in the original). Paul Alexis had a tenuous connection to Russian royalty, and the story that he liked to present about his origins was hard to take seriously by anyone apart from hopeless romantics similar to himself, which is understandable, since Alexis’s Ruritanian romance is displaced both in place and time by the British seaside in the 1930s, the only common feature between the two—the Ruritanian romance and the seaside holiday—probably being the cheap thrills they provided to those engaging with them. It is little wonder, then, that once his fantastical narrative has been validated by the outside world, even if this “outside world” is but one of mysterious conspirators working towards establishing Alexis on the Russian throne, he does not question the conspirators’ story as it is what he has been craving for his entire life, and is more than willing to step into the position prescribed for him by the Ruritanian romance narrative. He does not bother to examine whether the role offered to him by this narrative is actually feasible in the non-fictional world, or if he is fit for this role. He appears to be an anachronism himself, which is the circumstance his murderer takes

advantage of, however, without foreseeing the lengths Alexis is willing to go to, in order to better fit into the Ruritanian romance. For instance, the reason why his body is not found for several days, having been swept out to the sea, is the fact that it was weighed down by a belt containing a hundred gold sovereigns, which, at the time, were already infrequently used, and to obtain them, he had to present “a rambling kind of story [to the owner of the coins] about wanting gold sovereigns for some purpose or other. Something about wanting to buy a diamond from a foreign rajah who didn’t understand bank-notes—some bosh of that kind” (*Carcase* 128-29).

Meanwhile, Paul Alexis is surrounded by people who habitually engage in acting out cheap romances of a similar—and equally anachronistic—kind, and as such, fit perfectly into the vulgarity of the Resplendent Hotel: these are the “grotesque exaggerations of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality” that Mo Moulton also discusses (186). Mrs Weldon, Alexis’s elderly fiancée, a wealthy but hardly sophisticated lady, pretends to be much younger than she actually is, she searches for the passionate, romantic love she did not experience in her first marriage and appears to find it in the tall, dark, and handsome stranger. His former friend, vulgar and silly Leila Garland, presents herself as a lady whose attentions several gentlemen are vying for, while she surrounds herself with the same kind of cheap romances in the form of books and films that sustain Alexis as well; while his colleague, the dancer M. Antoine, coolly feeds the romantic fictions hotel guests create for themselves since he makes his living and supports his family from these fictions. All these characters are performing aggressive, exaggerated, and outdated versions of heterosexual femininity and masculinity, and expect Harriet and Wimsey to conform to these roles, as the detectives are seen as types, not as individuals. Mrs Weldon’s son, the farmer Henry, in a conversation with Lord Peter remarks, “Don’t like these beastly watering-places. Suits you all right, I daresay. . . . I was putting you down for something more in the West End line” (*Carcase* 153), thus identifying Lord Peter

with the fake sophistication and vulgarity they both attribute to watering places. Weldon makes the same mistake with Harriet, when he takes her clumsy attempts at flirting in the interest of the investigation at face value, and believes that she is genuinely interested in him and would welcome his romantic advances: “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. . . . Or, horrid thought, did he expect her to be completely promiscuous? That was it—he did!” (243). Even Harriet, who is such a stranger to the monstrous gaudiness of the Resplendent Hotel that she does not even have a dress to wear in the lounge when she first arrives, is momentarily taken in by the romance plot and cannot help but view herself and Lord Peter as participants in such a romance. Consequently, she eventually works herself up into a state of despair the first time they dance together, as Lord Peter appears to be cool and professional, and he does not immediately exhibit the reactions prescribed for him by the romance plot:

Silence for a few moments. Harriet felt that Wimsey ought to be saying, “How well you dance.” Since he did not say it, she became convinced that she was dancing like a wax doll with sawdust legs. Wimsey had never danced with her, held her in her arms before. It should have been an epoch-making moment for him. But his mind appeared to be concentrated upon the dull personality of an East Anglian farmer. She fell a victim to an inferiority complex, and tripped over her partner’s feet. . . . Wimsey glanced down at her in surprise and then suddenly smiled.

“Darling, if you danced like an elderly elephant with arthritis, I would dance the sun and moon into the sea with you. I have waited a thousand years to see you dance in that frock.” (*Carcase* 157)

These expectations of romantic clichés intrude upon even the most genuinely heartfelt moments between Harriet and Lord Peter: they are unable to enjoy their time together in the claustrophobic, gaudy atmosphere of the hotel, even though it is obvious that there is a spark between them. While the novel alternates between using the two detectives as focalizers, Harriet's perspective is favored most of the time, and we can also witness her recognizing Lord Peter as an object of erotic interest, noting, when they are both wearing bathing suits and exploring the scene of the crime that "he strips better than I should have expected Better shoulders than I realised, and, thank Heaven, calves to his legs" (104). In this moment, Lord Peter's body is the object of Harriet's gaze, when Harriet defies the expectations of the romance genre, and, instead of being seen as a body herself, she recognizes Lord Peter for the first time as a body, and an attractive body at that.

In light of this, it comes as no surprise that Harriet feels stifled in Paul Alexis's story: as it turns out, not only all the major characters in the case base their identities on romantic fictions, the murder itself is a piece of fiction as well, written by Henry Weldon and his associates, a playwright and an actress. Even though the murder is motivated by the most prosaic reason, a son's greed for his mother's money, everything else is built up as fiction, the kind of fiction that would be most appealing to the victim, and, eventually, to the police as well, as the conspirators are planning to explain away their involvement in the case by arguing that they were working on a play and conducted research relevant to its subject matter. They also take advantage of the location's obviously anachronistic nature in the construction of their crime: two of the conspirators figure as an itinerant hairdresser, and a working-class camper, that is, typical characters in popular seaside destinations, who are also conveniently hard to track down, given the abundance of such individuals frequenting watering-places and the temporariness of their positions. When all this is revealed, Wimsey, a true romantic amongst all the sham, explodes in disgust at the mercenary nature of the murder

and that of all the relationships that have been uncovered in the course of the investigation: “[I]sn’t that a damned awful, bitter, bloody farce? The old fool who wanted a lover and the young fool who wanted an empire. One cut throat and three people hanged, and £130,000 going begging for the next man who likes to sell his body and soul for it. God! What a jape! King Death has asses’ ears with a vengeance” (460).

Conclusion

The novel ends with Harriet being frightened by, and disgusted with the monstrous and transactional realities of the romance plot. She and Lord Peter “go home” (460), ostensibly to Piccadilly and away from the seaside, but rather, to their own versions of romance, which are not based on a give and take of financial means, nor on fossilized ideas about passion, or the roles of each partner in the relationship. By then, it has become abundantly clear to her that the traditional romance is too restrictive and stifling for both her and Lord Peter. As Sayers, in her novel series featuring Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, keeps experimenting with form and genre, the two detectives are also given a chance to explore different templates for a romantic relationship, and, in *Have His Carcase*, they do away with the traditional romance plot for good. Even though their shared history would push them in that direction, with Lord Peter saving Harriet from the gallows, the next installment in the series highlights Harriet’s reluctance at being saved, and her strong need to be in control of her narrative as a woman and as a writer gains the upper hand.

After *Have His Carcase* has made Harriet and Lord Peter face outdated gender norms and relationship models, the final volumes in the series, *Gaudy Night* and *Busman’s Honeymoon* also feature traditional heterosexual relationships that the detectives perceive as cautionary tales about the dangers of compromising one’s integrity for the sake of romance; they continue to search for a definition of romance that allows them to retain their personal

and professional selves intact within the confines of a relationship. To achieve that, the series experiments with different genres that serve as vehicles for the detectives' romantic adventures, and examines the problem adopting the lens of a classically educated Oxford scholar in *Gaudy Night*. The final installment, *Busman's Honeymoon*, taking place in the newlywed Wimseys' country home, eventually offers a comedy that allows the detectives to not only preserve their romantic and professional passions, but also to share these, without compromising their identities in the process. Harriet and Lord Peter are rewarded with this uncompromised happy ending, however, not only because of their exceptional integrity and self-awareness: it is undeniable that the success of their relationship depends, to a large degree, on their societal and class privileges. They have the freedom and the time to experiment with genres and with different types of relationships, and they can escape the vulgarities and common exhibitions of the traditional heterosexual romance that the detectives found so repulsive at Wilvercombe. In *Have His Carcase*, the dubious and antiquated splendour of the seaside resort serves just as much a cautionary tale as a displaced Ruritanian romance acted out in these incongruous surroundings: the traditional romance narratives are exposed as cheap, garish and stifling, and trying to re-enact them can be a deadly endeavour.

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Notes

¹ In fact, *Have His Carcase* is not the first Sayers novel set by the sea: the one preceding it, *Five Red Herrings*, presents a slightly fictionalized version of Kirkcudbright, Galloway, a real place in Scotland near the shore, popular with fishermen and artists, and a beloved holiday destination for Sayers and her husband (Moulton 137).

² It is worth noting that *Busman's Honeymoon* was originally written for the stage in 1936 in collaboration with Sayers's long-time friend, writer and historian Muriel St. Clare Byrne. In fact, Sayers and Byrne started working on the play even before *Gaudy Night*, the novel whose events chronologically precede those of *Busman's Honeymoon*, thus *Gaudy Night* was eventually written to bridge the gap between the couple's mildly hostile flirting in *Have His Carcase*, and the Wimseys' first days as a married couple in *Busman's Honeymoon* (Moulton 195).

³ I am grateful to the *As My Wimsey Takes Me* podcast for calling my attention to this point in their first episode on *Have His Carcase* in Episode 16.

⁴ As Goldsworthy points out, the chance of that happening was rather slim, but "the Albanian throne was offered twice to [British soldier, diplomat and traveller] Aubrey Herbert, . . . as well as to the cricketer C. B. Fry" (44), so the assumption that a British individual might become a "Ruritanian" monarch, while not necessarily feasible, was not entirely unfounded either.

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