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In an essay titled with the striking question "Are Women Human?" author and scholar Dorothy L. Sayers explains why she resists the popular title of "feminist." Originally given as an address to a women's society in 1938, during the interwar period that was perhaps the most productive of Sayers's life, the piece advocates equality for individuals—individuals, male and female, for whom sex is a part, but not the whole, of personal identity. Sayers's vision of equality for women is made of the same stuff of her vision of equality for men, and for all people: "What we ask is to be human individuals, however peculiar and unexpected," Sayers writes, and admonishes the prevalent brand of feminism that insists upon women brandishing stethoscope and gavel, sporting regalia and lab coat as they storm the doors of professions and occupations closed to those of their sex for centuries ("Are Women Human?" 112). This insistence that women claim anything and everything that once belonged only to men prescribes a new set of limiting expectations for women, and denies them the freedom of individuality that might naturally and rightly make any person, male or female, a better parent than a pharmacist, or better suited to nursing than to practicing law. In many of her essays, as well as her detective fiction, Sayers wrestles with the inherent obstacles surrounding the issue of valid vocation in the lives of women, and challenges the "feminism" that takes away a woman's right to be a human being, and to be herself.

Valid vocation for women is an issue at the center of one of Sayers's most notable novels, *Gaudy Night*, part of a series of mysteries featuring the charming Lord

Peter Wimsey and the brilliant woman he loves, Miss Harriet Vane. Miss Vane is the main figure in this particular novel, as she struggles both internally and externally with the subject of valid vocation for women. Miss Vane is an alumnus of the aptly named Shrewsbury College at Oxford. The entirely female faculty, students, and staff are constantly struggling through the debates, arguments, and prejudices surrounding the controversial subject of higher education for women. Shrewsbury has some of the most prominent female scholars in the world at one of the world's most venerated—and mostly male—academic institutions. As Miss Vane, Lord Peter Wimsey, and the members of the Senior Common Room grapple with the mysterious poison-pen and vandal who has targeted the female academic with violent hatred, the heat surrounding the controversy of women's rights, identity, and vocation intensifies. The strange crimes committed in the name of hatred for the female scholar, and the pursuit of the perpetrator, almost fall to the background of the novel as Sayers sets up the professional and personal struggles of Miss Vane and her fellow Shrewsburians as multi-faceted examples of the complex issues surrounding valid vocation for women.

Miss Harriet Vane has returned to her alma mater after many tumultuous years, ostensibly to investigate the recent criminal activity at Shrewsbury. During her time being cloistered within the college's walls, her search for her own identity, life's work, and the possibility of a place for Lord Peter Wimsey in her life rise to the surface. "Suppose one is cursed with both a heart and a brain?" Miss Vane asks a member of

the faculty and herself, and sums up the problem for so many women who are forced to make the choice between family life and professional life (*Gaudy Night* 190). This difficult choice is one that is almost completely unique to women, Sayers is quick to point out, as men are rarely required to choose one in favor of the other:

What woman really prefers a job to a home and family? Very few, I admit. It is unfortunate that they should so often have to make the choice. A man does not, as a rule, have to choose. He gets both...Nevertheless, there have been women, such as Queen Elizabeth and Florence Nightingale, who had the choice, and chose the job and made a success of it. And there have been and are many men who have sacrificed their careers for women—sometimes, like Antony or Parnell, very disastrously. When it comes to a choice, then every man or woman has to choose as an individual human being, and, like a human being, take the consequences (“Are Women Human?” 110-111).

Regardless of the inherent unfairness of such a decision being left for the most part only to women, Sayers stands by her conviction that the natural consequences of making such a choice, like the consequences that come of any choice, must be faced by the individual. Just as equality is a matter of the individual, so are the responsibilities and challenges that come of the unique decisions that a person makes in response to a unique set of situations and circumstances.

Miss Harriet Vane, like all of the women of Shrewsbury College, is confronted with just such a set of unique situations and circumstances. Struggling to overcome a painful and tragic past that has left her with emotional scars and a conflicted sense of personal identity, Miss Vane must

decide if loving the charismatic Lord Peter will mean an end to her increasing understanding of herself and her calling in life, and her freedom to pursue that calling wherever it might take her. Rediscovering her aptitude and passion for writing, and the liberty it allows her for analysis and expression leads her to cherish that freedom even more, and makes her decision even more difficult. As she weighs the likelihood of having to sacrifice some of her scholarly and literary pursuits to the calling of husband and family—one that has its own set of attractive and equally valid qualities—she must decide if love and career can co-exist.

The plausibility of the harmonious co-existence of love and career is almost an accepted fact in our present day and age, but for the ladies of the Senior Common Room at Shrewsbury and their contemporaries, that is not the case. Mrs. Goodwin, a member of the Senior Common Room and “an excellent secretary,” is the subject of a heated discussion on the proper priority of career and family when the recently widowed woman is called away from the summer term to nurse her young son, who has become ill with the measles (*Gaudy Night* 249). While some side with Mrs. Goodwin’s need to be with her ailing son, others insist that “if the domestic responsibility is to take precedence of the public responsibility, then work should be handed over to someone else to do ” (*Gaudy Night* 249). It is perhaps most reasonable to believe that however unfortunate might be the circumstances that would require the making of such a decision, Sayers would agree with the latter opinion, when she writes elsewhere that “If they are going to adopt the very sound principle that the job should be done by the person who does it best, then that rule must be applied universally” (“Are Women Human?” 110). While Mrs. Good-

win and others like her find themselves in undoubtedly difficult situations that require them to make undoubtedly difficult choices between career and family—situations and choices with which men are confronted far less frequently—Sayers stands by her belief that the individual must make his or her own decisions, and face the consequences that result, however difficult. If women are to be considered on an equal plane with men, then the universal rule of giving the job to whomever can best do it must always be applied, regardless of the extenuating circumstances that might make the woman's absolute commitment to career or family a more difficult choice to make. The difficulty of this choice is evident among the women of the Senior Common Room, who have chosen for themselves to put career above family. The pain often involved in making such a decision is unflinchingly brought to the surface of the debate over Mrs. Goodwin by the acerbic Miss Hillyard:

'The fact is, though you will never admit it, that everybody in this place has an inferiority complex about married women and children. For all your talk about careers and independence, you all believe in your hearts that we ought to abase ourselves before any woman who has fulfilled her animal functions...I shouldn't mind if you said openly that intellectual interests were only a second-best; but you pretend to put them first in theory and are ashamed of them in practice' (Gaudy Night 249-250).

The loneliness and discomfort of the career woman, or any person who has made the choice to give career priority over family, is a cold reality, and the same that must be faced by any person, male or female, who makes a similar decision for their lives. What Miss Hillyard (and to some degree, Sayers) advocates is a resignation and ac-

ceptance of one's choices and their natural consequences. Where Miss Hillyard perhaps oversteps her bounds (and strays from the opinion of Sayers) is by insisting that every woman who has made the choice of career over family should demand that every other woman who is faced with such a choice make the same decision as they. Although the circumstances of Mrs. Goodwin are undeniably dire, her choices are her own, and should be respected as such.

This forcing of a woman to fit a mold of choices that are not of her own making is the dilemma of another woman of Shrewsbury, the young Miss Cattermole, a student at the college. The beneficiary of a world class education that she does not want, she rebels against the rules of the institution, the school's expectations, and the parents that have placed her there against her will. Miss Cattermole has the particular misfortune of being the daughter and "sacrificial victim" of her parents' social idealism and ambition (*Gaudy Night* 169). "I don't want to be here; I never did. Only my parents were so keen," she explains to Miss Vane after recovering from a hangover she acquired while crashing a party at one of the men's colleges and then being unceremoniously dumped inside the Shrewsbury walls well after curfew (*Gaudy Night* 169). Her rebellions against the school's strictly enforced rules began after her long-standing engagement with another Oxford student was broken and she suddenly found herself without a reason for "bothering with all of this dead-and-gone History" (*Gaudy Night* 169). Her real desire is to be either a nurse or a cook, two professions forbidden to her because "those are two of the things Mother's always trying to get people out of the way of thinking women's sphere ought to be restricted to" (*Gaudy Night* 170). This philosophy, combined with her parents' desire for her to

"make the right kinds of friends" at Oxford or Cambridge and make an "educational advance" force Miss Cattermole into a world where opportunities abound for a life that she does not want (*Gaudy Night* 170). Her parents' commitment to freeing their daughter from the constraints that society has placed upon women's aspirations has effectively enslaved her to a different set of limiting expectations.

Miss Vane reacts angrily to the knowledge of how the fight for women's rights has only resulted in a waste—of a young woman's energy, dreams, and ambition, and of a place at Shrewsbury that could be filled by another young woman who thirsts for the kind of education and knowledge that Oxford has to offer a precious few. "Why do they send these people here?" she asks the Dean in a rage. "Making themselves miserable and taking up the place of people who *would* enjoy Oxford. We haven't got room for women who aren't and never will be scholars," Miss Vane argues, and points out that the all the effort to free women from the restrictions placed upon them is wasted when they are restricted to vocations to which they aren't truly called or committed (*Gaudy Night* 171). In order to prove themselves as rightfully deserving a place as equals in the academy and elsewhere in the professional world, women scholars cannot afford to risk the ridicule and disregard that might come from critics of higher education for women should they find indifferent and disinterested women scholars to hold up as examples of female incompetence. If Sayers' universal rule that the job should belong to the person who can do it best is applied, then women cannot be forced into lifestyles that are not of their own choosing, for the result will only be a waste of time, and energy, and a job done poorly for lack of the passion to do it truly well.

The "feminism" against which Sayers is so ardently opposed is the same as any categorization that imposes limits on who people can be and the choices that they can make concerning their lives. "All categories, if they are insisted upon beyond the immediate purpose which they serve, breed class antagonism and disruption in the state, and that is why they are dangerous," Sayers writes, and sums up her explanation of how the most prevalent forms of feminism, like any kind of categorization, deny the humanity of those categorized ("Are Women Human?" 114-115).

Although the structures of society are such that many women find themselves confronted with difficult choices to make concerning their most valid vocation in life—choices with which men are far less often confronted—being able to make those decisions for oneself with the resolve and courage to face the resulting consequences is a sign of a person treated as an equal, an individual, a human being. The real crux of the struggle for equal rights for women lies not in the forcing of all women into yet another restrictive mold of expectations that requires that they find their calling and identity in disciplines and professions heretofore closed to them, but rather in the emancipation from any kind of expectation that society might want to place on them. In her writing Sayers makes plain the idea that as hard as women must fight for their rightful places in the upper echelons of the academic and professional worlds dominated by men, a "woman's place" should be wherever she wants to be, whether it be behind a stove or a podium.

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