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## **Books, Theology, and Hens: The Correspondence and Friendship of C. S. Lewis and Dorothy L. Sayers**

by Laura K. Simmons and Gary L. Tandy

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In *The Four Loves*, C. S. Lewis suggests that “Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure (or burden). The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, “What? You too? I thought I was the only one.” (96) The reader of the correspondence between Dorothy L. Sayers and C. S. Lewis comes across frequent instances of these “What? You too?” moments. Sayers likely experienced such a moment when she first read Lewis’s *That Hideous Strength* and wrote to him mentioning, among many other things she admired, the “marvelous confusion of tongues at the dinner and the painful realism of that college meeting” (Letter, December 3, 1945). Lewis, no doubt, experienced something similar when he read with pleasure Sayers’s translation of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, writing to her that her translation read like an “exciting story” and noting, “I set out with the idea of attending to your translation, before I’ve read a page I’ve forgotten all about you and am thinking only of Dante, and two pages later I’ve forgotten about Dante and am thinking about Hell” (Letter, November 15, 1949).

That Lewis and Sayers had much in common and that their lives intersected in a number of interesting ways throughout their careers is common knowledge for even the casual follower of either author. What does not seem to have been appreciated or explained sufficiently in the scholarship to date is the nature of the friendship between these

two influential Christian authors. Therefore, it is this friendship we wish to shed light on, using as our primary source the correspondence between Lewis and Sayers from 1942-1957. In addition, we look at what the biographers of each author have to say about their relationship.

C. S. Lewis and Dorothy Sayers became friends as a result of their common interests and vocations and, initially, because each admired the other's work. Their correspondence begins with Sayers writing a "fan letter" to Lewis about his *Screwtape Letters* while at the same time Lewis is expressing his admiration for Sayers's *The Mind of the Maker* and *The Man Who Would be King* to other correspondents. Lewis obviously admired her as an author. His letters responding to her books, articles, and her Dante translation are effusive in their praise. While he offers suggestions and a few critiques, the number of these is small compared to the praise. In one letter he jokes that he has included several comments and suggestions, which he knows she will ignore. Sayers writes to praise Lewis's work often, as well, and recommends his books to her friends. Her earliest extant letter to him, sent with a copy of her radio plays, is written in the style of *Screwtape*. She recommends *The Problem of Pain* often to people who contact her seeking reading recommendations. Sayers also passes on praises she hears from others, both for Lewis's *Arthurian Torso* and for *Out of the Silent Planet*.

The two authors are so familiar with each other's work they make frequent suggestions of books or articles the other should attempt. The most notable example is when Sayers complains in one of her letters that there exists no up-to-date treatment of miracles, and in a letter a short time later Lewis tells Sayers that he is beginning a book on miracles. Lewis's suggestions to Sayers are not often as well received, as when he suggests she write a book for a Christian series. Not only does Sayers refuse, but her refusal leads to a lengthy epistolary debate about the motivations and purposes that should drive the Christian writer to create. Likewise, Lewis turns down Sayers's offer to write a preface for a book on existentialism, saying "I know (and care) little about the Existentialist nonsense and wouldn't dream of writing a preface" (Letter, November 1949).

Both were philosophers and theologians who thought deeply about the state of Christianity in the modern world and shared similar, though not identical, worldviews. Both were Anglicans who wrote nonfiction and imaginative literature with apologetic outcomes, causing one contemporary critic to dub them the "Hallelujah Chorus" (Hone 180). Both were students of literature, who loved to read,

analyze, and discuss it with other perceptive and appreciative readers. Finally, both were practitioners of the art of letter writing, who took the time to write detailed and interesting letters to their friends and received pleasure from reading the correspondence they received in return, though Lewis denigrated his own letter writing skills while praising Sayers's, calling her "a real letter writer" and suggesting that she would be remembered as "one of the great English letter writers" (Letter, December 14, 1945).

As Lewis notes in *The Four Loves*, friendship often arises between companions who share a common religion, common studies, or a common profession. As he states, "All who share it will be our companions; but one or two or three who share something more will be our Friends." Lewis further qualifies his definition by noting that sharing something more does not necessarily mean agreeing on everything. Quoting Emerson's comment that in friendship saying "Do you love me?" means "Do you see the same truth?—Or at least, 'Do you care about the same truth?'" Lewis continues, "The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer" (Lewis 97). Lewis's definition adds an important ingredient to the friendship of Lewis and Sayers. While the two authors were of the same mind on many issues, they most certainly did not agree on everything. And both writers relish debating those points of disagreement.

That the two writers share many basic assumptions and preferences is clear. In one letter, Lewis addresses Sayers as "sister dinosaur," referring to his Cambridge inaugural lecture description of himself because of his love for old books and appreciation of the medieval worldview. She, in turn, calls herself "your fellow artefact," and also adopts the dinosaur language. This feeling of shared views comes through often, especially when conspiring to attack a common "enemy," such as F. R. Leavis, Kathleen Nott, or other modernist or secular critics and writers. As Carol and Philip Zaleski note, "Sayers had much in common with Lewis and Tolkien's circle, including a love of orthodox Christianity, traditional verse, popular fiction, and debate" (352). Part of the kinship Lewis felt with Sayers was no doubt because both were part of the "movement" to take seriously orthodox Christianity and write works that would be relevant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lewis and Sayers shared another key belief: that popular and entertaining literature could achieve excellence while communicating Christian beliefs and values. Examples include Sayers's Lord Peter

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Wimsey crime novels and her Canterbury plays and Lewis's children's fantasy novels and science fiction trilogy. Lewis comments on this shared value in his tribute to Sayers, written following her death, where he notes: "She aspired to be, and was, at once a popular entertainer and a conscientious craftsman: like (in her degree) Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, or Moliere," adding, "I have an idea that, with a very few exceptions, it is only such writers who matter much in the long run" (Lewis, "Panegyric" 92).

A major area of disagreement theologically is the movement toward the ordination of women in the Church of England. Lewis, who opposes the idea, writes to Sayers, assuming she is of the same mind, and asks her to use her influence against it. Sayers declines, noting that she sees no theological reason why women could not be ordained as priests. She tells Lewis, "I fear you would find me rather an uneasy ally" in his objection to the movement (Letter, July 19, 1948).

This last disagreement highlights a fact that to this point we've ignored: that Lewis was a man and Sayers was a woman, yet they became friends. This reality seems important to address for two reasons: (1) Lewis brings up the difficulties of male-female friendships in his own writing, and (2) much discussion has occurred in recent Lewis scholarship around his attitudes toward and relationships with women. In *The Four Loves*, Lewis notes that because friendships arise among companions, in "most societies at most periods Friendship will be between men and men or between women and women" (72); however, he goes on to say that "where men and women work side by side, or in the mission field, or among authors and artists, such Friendship is common" (72). Thus, Lewis would have viewed his friendship with Sayers (along with his friendships with other women like Ruth Pitter and Sister Penelope) as entirely natural. As Alan Jacobs notes, "the tone he uses with female writers such as Dorothy Sayers and female scholars such as Helen Gardner and Joan Bennett is fully as respectful and serious as the tone he uses with their male counterparts, though it is sometimes a bit more courtly" (255). In spite of this, though Sayers maintained friendships with several of the Inklings, she would not have been welcomed in their weekly meetings at the pub or in Lewis's rooms due to basic social proprieties of the day.

To the second point, Lewis's attitude toward women, Sayers's letters shed interesting light on that topic. As we noted earlier, she often recommends Lewis's books to her friends, but these recommendations come with qualifications. Writing to Mrs. Robert Darby, for example, she states, "I do admit that he is apt to write shocking nonsense about

women and marriage. (That, however, is not because he is a bad theologian but because he is a rather frightened bachelor.)” (Letter, May 31, 1948). Similarly, she writes to Barbara Reynolds about Lewis: “One just has to accept the fact that there is a complete blank in his mind where women are concerned. Charles Williams and his other married friends used to sit round him at Oxford and tell him so, but there really isn’t anything to be done about it. He is not hostile, and he does his best, and actually, for a person with his limitations I think he didn’t do too badly with the Lady in *Perelandra*” (December 21, 1955). Finally, we note that the author of a recent study on Lewis and gender argues that Lewis’s views on gender slowly changed over time and that the change “owed much to the intellectual and Christian ties he forged with Dorothy L. Sayers, a woman of his own class and educational background” (Van Leeuwen, 12).

While Lewis and Sayers address a variety of theological and literary topics in their letters, the reader of their correspondence comes away with the clear impression their friendship transcended professional and theological interests. They clearly like one another and enjoy each other’s company. Lewis frequently invites Sayers to lunch when she is in Oxford or Cambridge and looks for opportunities to meet her when they are attending the same conference. Likewise, in a 1949 letter, Sayers tells Lewis she is coming to Oxford to speak and says, “I do hope you will be there and that we can meet and have a good talk. It is a long time since we set eyes on each other, though we have kept in touch by hand o’ write...” (Letter, January 26, 1949).

Reading through the letters chronologically gives a sense of a developing friendship that became warmer and more intimate over time. While the early letters focus more on theological and literary matters, later letters bring in more personal references and revelations. Notably, Lewis’s letters to Sayers from 1942 to 1954 all begin with the same greeting: “Dear Miss Sayers” and close with the signature “C. S. Lewis.” But, then, in a letter dated September 25, 1954, Lewis for the first time opens with the greeting “Dear Dorothy” and closes with the signature “Jack.” Lewis continues this pattern through the remainder of their correspondence. Likewise, Sayers begins addressing him as “Jack” in late 1954. As early as 1947, however, the friendship has developed to the point where Lewis and Sayers feel comfortable sharing, not only grand ideas about theology and literature, but the ordinary details of their lives. Lewis, for example, received great delight from reading this account of Sayers’s hens:

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I have purchased two Hens. In their habits they display, respectively Sense and Sensibility, and I have therefore named them Elinor and Marianne. Elinor is a round, comfortable, motherly-looking little body who lays one steady, regular, undistinguished egg per day, and allows nothing to disturb her equanimity. Marianne is leggier, timid, and liable to hysterics. Sometime she lays a shell-less egg, sometimes a double yolk, sometimes no egg at all. On the days when she lays no egg she nevertheless goes and sits in the nest for the usual time, and seems to imagine that nothing more is required. As my gardener says: "She just *thinks* she's laid an egg." Too much imagination—in fact, Sensibility. But when she does lay an egg it is larger than Elinor's. But you cannot wish to listen to this cackle . . . (Letter, June 2, 1947).

Overall, their letters reflect the easy banter of those who are trusted friends and intellectually well matched.

The growing trust over time between Sayers and Lewis is also evident. Several examples will illustrate Lewis's level of trust in Sayers as a friend. In a 1946 letter, in a discussion of apologetic writing, Lewis reveals to Sayers "the fact that apologetic work is so dangerous to one's own faith. A doctrine never seems dimmer to me than when I have just successfully defended it" (Letter, August 2, 1946). George Sayer, in his biography of Lewis, comments on the significance of this revelation: "He [Lewis] valued friends who supported him without fawning over him, who challenged him to improve as a thinker, artist, and Christian. Barfield, Tolkien, Williams, Sayers, and Sister Penelope fit this description. In particular, he worried that apologetics might be bad for his faith. He could not discuss this sensitive question with Tolkien, but to comrade-in-apologetics Dorothy L. Sayers he confessed" it (Sayer 314). Lewis freely shares his personal and family problems with Sayers, for example, the difficult situations with Mrs. Moore's illness and Warnie's alcoholism in 1949. Finally, while Lewis's relationship and eventual marriage to Joy Gresham were kept secret even from most of Lewis's friends, he openly shares what, today, Facebook would call his relationship status with Dorothy Sayers. In a December 1956 letter, he informs Sayers of the marriage though in a very understated way, saying "Certain problems do not arise between a dying woman and an elderly man." However, six months later he discloses to Sayers that his feelings toward Joy have changed, saying "I hope you give us your blessing: I know you'll give us your prayers" (Letter, June 25, 1957). We agree with Alan Jacobs, who calls Lewis's

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disclosure to Sayers in this letter “uncharacteristically self-revealing” (Jacobs 285).

Given the evidence from the correspondence that reveals Lewis and Sayers to be not only companions but, in Lewis’s words, friends who shared something more, it seems fair to say that biographers have tended to underestimate the extent and quality of this friendship. Lewis’s biographers typically include only two or three references to Sayers, most commonly focusing on her role as a guest speaker at the Oxford Socratic Club and her contribution to the volume of critical essays in honor of Charles Williams. Sayers’s biographers, too, focus less on the friendship than on the content of the correspondence.

Ultimately, when it comes to assessing the friendship of Lewis and Sayers, it seems fitting to let these two masterful Christian writers have the last word: In a 1945 letter to Barbara Reynolds, Sayers says, speaking of Lewis, “I like him very much, and always find him stimulating and amusing” (Letter, December 21, 1955); and, following Sayers’s death in 1957, Lewis writes, “For all she did and was—for delight and instruction, for her militant loyalty as a friend, . . .—let us thank the Author who invented her” (Lewis, “A Panegyric” 95).

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