

**‘It’s a Good Thing to Take an Interest’: Care and University Women in Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* and Barbara Pym’s *No Fond Return of Love***

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*Abstract*

This essay explores evolving discourses of academic care labour in the university novel. It focuses on Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* (1935) with further discussion of Barbara Pym’s *No Fond Return of Love* (1961), two novels written at transformational moments when women’s participation in higher education was increasing and the emergence of the welfare state was transforming ideas about the social function of the university. While care has always been understood, albeit in amorphous ways, as a vital part of learning, thinking, and educating, it has also become an implicit form of academic labour, which often goes unaccounted for in academic contracts and disproportionately falls to women. This essay considers how academic work has transformed in the wake of what Arlie Hochschild terms the growth of the ‘care sector;’ it explores the forms of academic care labour as well as the spaces, both institutional and symbolic, in which such labour is undertaken. As the novels depict women academics who are ambivalent about performing care labour, they prefigure ongoing debates about whether the public sphere can be transformed by a feminine ethics which values emotion and relationship building or whether such an ethics of care may enable the exploitation of caregivers and perpetuate a history of female exploitation.

Keywords: care; intellectual labour; education; academic novel; emotional labour

‘It’s a good thing to take an interest’, says one of Dorothy L. Sayers’s fictional female academics in the 1935 campus detective novel, *Gaudy Night*. While Miss Shaw’s ‘interest’ is satirized as an at times intrusive over-involvement in the lives of her young students, it signals Sayers’s larger engagement throughout *Gaudy Night* with questions around the duties of care that university women have towards each other, their students, and their intellectual work. Written at a time when women’s participation in higher education, as both students and faculty, had increased but was still contested, *Gaudy Night* explicitly intervenes in contemporary debates about the point and purpose of academia as a vocation or profession for women, and responds to cultural anxieties about the influence of women scholars on the modern university. These anxieties frequently touch upon questions of care, as Sayers presents the university as a hallowed space of intellectual and personal freedom and, at the same time, participates in a conversation about how women’s academic labour might transform both themselves and the hitherto predominantly masculine spaces in which they work for both good and bad. The concerns that Sayers engages with about whether taking ‘an interest’ is the mark of committed

pedagogy or emotional indulgence and about whether ‘interest’ is an affective or intellectual response, continue to resonate in contemporary academia. *Gaudy Night* can thus productively be positioned in a larger conversation about the role of emotion in academic or intellectual work, particularly for women academics, helping to historicize some of the cultural constructions of care labour that continue to both underpin and shape higher education.

From Aristotle’s notions of good will in educating virtuous citizens to educational philosopher Nel Nodding’s assertion that ‘caring is the bedrock of all successful education’ (1992: 27), care has always been understood, albeit in amorphous ways, as a vital part of learning, thinking, and educating. Critiques of the growth of the neoliberal university often posit care as a precious resource to be protected, with frequently used terms such as ‘good’, ‘public’ or ‘civic mission’, and ‘values’ marshalling a vocabulary of care which, some fear, has been extracted from the fundamental mission of the university. Martha Nussbaum, for example, argues that education in the arts and humanities, especially literature, is central to universities and democracy itself, not only because it develops skills of reasoning and argument, but also because such education cultivates imagination, empathy, character, and caring. Nussbaum’s work is interesting, not necessarily because it offers a solution to the commercialization of academia – Anne Whitehead condemns Nussbaum’s ‘reassuring platitudes’, arguing that the humanities cannot be a ‘panacea’ for a ‘prevailing “health” crisis (whether of democracy or of systems of care)’ (2011: 58) – but rather because it suggests how deeply embedded concepts of care are in our understandings of education. Contemporary changes to higher education institutions can be seen to partake in a larger ‘crisis of care’ that involves both the devaluing of care work and the subsumption of caretaking by the gig economy (The Care Collective 2020: 3). If it is true that, as Rosalind Gill and others have argued, the ‘value of the social and convivial features of academic life’ are being diminished in the contemporary university (Gill 2018: 106), then it is worth turning, I argue, to texts which offer a useful pre-history to this current crisis and suggest the complicated and uncomfortable ways in which understandings of care have long been imbricated with academic work. In this essay, I approach care labour, and particularly its gendered associations, at the modern university through reading Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* alongside another interestingly out of the box or ill-fitting academic novel, Barbara Pym’s 1961 *No Fond Return of Love*. I consider the forms that care takes in academic work and the values assigned (or not) to academic care labour. The essay is, furthermore, attentive to the locational, institutional, and symbolic spaces in which care labour is performed as well as the possible representational forms for academic care labour.

### *The Place of Care in Academic Work*

In 2013, almost 80 years after the publication of *Gaudy Night* and in a very different academic and cultural context, bell hooks posits teaching as ‘at its best . . . a *caring* profession’ (2003: 84, my emphasis). In ‘How Can We Serve’, hooks characterizes teaching as a ‘commitment to service’ (83), writing that ‘caring educators open the mind, allowing students to embrace a world of knowing that is always subject to change and challenge’ (92). hooks posits care as not only a crucial component of successful pedagogy that enables intellectual freedom but also a radical, feminist act and, even, a gesture of political resistance in an institutional context where service is often undervalued.<sup>1</sup> Yet it is also true that the labour of care tends to fall to certain demographics – namely contingent faculty, women, and people of colour; hooks’s hope that altruistic modes of service can offer affective resistance is thus thrown into question by a modern university that has instrumentalized care.<sup>2</sup> As neoliberal missions and marketing sell student-faculty ratios, class sizes, and idealistic visions of campus community, on the one hand, the caring academic service worker risks becoming, to use a term also central to Emily Ridge’s understanding of care labour, a middleman in the service of for-profit education, and, on the other hand, care labour suggests possibilities of ‘reorient[ing] us from expectations of profit or gain toward questions of ethics’ (Whitehead 80). Care has become an ideological battleground in the modern university, a word that signals both radical possibilities and an exploitative second economy.

In *The Managed Heart* Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labour as ‘the management of feeling’ that accrues an ‘exchange value’ and is then ‘sold for a wage’ (1983: 7). Hochschild’s primary case study is the emotional labour of flight attendants who produce and display feelings in the service of their work. Her description of emotional labour as the expected performance of a particular set of emotions in the regular execution of a job perhaps does not seem, on the surface, to describe the labour of academics. After all, academic workers are not as a rule asked to produce a sincere smile and their performance of emotions is neither overtly managed nor compensated for. However, her descriptions of service workers who move frequently for work and who become intermediaries between companies (institutions) and customers (students) may well resonate with academics in an increasingly precarious higher education landscape. While remaining attuned to the dangers of concept creep, Hochschild’s theories reveal the role of emotional labour in academic work. Hochschild posits that two thirds of workers have jobs that require some degree of emotional labour (her context here is specifically American). In her discussion of emotion work as a kind of ‘shadow labor’ – unseen

effort that ‘does not quite count as labor but is nevertheless crucial to getting other things done’ (167) – Hirschfeld cites a 1976 study on male and female university teachers that found that ‘students expected women professors to be warmer and more supportive than male professors; given these expectations, proportionally more women professors were perceived as cold’ (167). Similar results in more recent studies of gender discrepancies of teaching evaluations suggest that in the space of the university, care labour is fuelled by inherited academic ideals and constrained by normative ideas around gender, race, sexuality, and age.<sup>3</sup>

If, as bell hooks suggests, care is a kind of service that enacts political resistance precisely because ‘it is a practice of giving that eschews the notion of reward’ (91), Hirschfeld’s work explores the transformation of gifts of care into commodities. What happens when the care that is freely given does not build solidarity and support, but is, rather, co-opted to serve the commercial interests of the institution? Much like the other middle-class professional categories of doctor, lawyer, and social worker that Hirschfeld mentions in her study, academics do not work under an ‘emotional supervisor’ but rather ‘supervise their own emotional labor by considering informal professional norms’, performing emotional labour that is ‘seldom recognized, rarely honoured, and almost never taken into account by employers as a source of on-the-job stress’ (153). This very ephemerality risks enabling exploitation when care becomes a job expectation disproportionately assigned and without explicit metrics or rewards. It is, however, the very stochastic nature of care which, for hooks, makes it valuable; in its immeasurability care work evades, and offers a radical alternative, to an academic system increasingly preoccupied with measurable outputs.

### *Finding Forms for Academic Care Labour*

In *The Teaching Archive*, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan note that the history of university of teaching is difficult to trace because it is one of ‘ephemeral acts and documents’, and practices which ‘whether rehearsed or improvised, remain largely unrecorded’ (2021: 14). The same might be said for practices of care work. As Clare Mariskind notes, ‘the way care in higher education is enacted will depend on what is meant by care, how it is valued and who does the caring’ (2014: 318). Tiana Dowie-Chin and Stephanie Schroeder propose three different modes of care work in higher education: critical maternal, calculated, or neoliberal, each influenced by the teacher’s background, approach, and experiences (2020). Such attempts to codify care only serve to highlight the fact that care work is inherently nebulous and slippery. Sara Burton understands care, along with kindness, as ‘multifaceted, paradoxical, and ambiguous sets of dispositions, acts, and ways of narrating the sociability of academic life’

(2021: 22). While most discussions of academic care work tend to focus on the care that teachers offer students, Burton offers a more holistic understanding that goes beyond teaching to consider more nuanced ideas around collegiality. Where, though, do we find documentation of or representations of care labour in relation to academic work? They do not often appear in bureaucratic forms such as contracts or formal evaluations. Some teaching evaluations may include a question about whether the student felt that their teacher ‘cared’ about their progress in a particular course, but such metrics are, at best, insufficient records of pedagogical practices and relationships. While care labour is an essential component of research, from informal discussions and collaborations to editing and proofreading, it happens behind the scenes. Traces may appear only on the margins or in the paratextual spaces of an academic work, written into the footnotes of our essays or the acknowledgment pages of our books. As something both essential and auxiliary to the neoliberal university, care labour might be understood in terms of Jacques Derrida’s logic of the supplement (1998). It both compensates for and reveals an existing lack. Simultaneously supplementary and marginal, care labour often goes undocumented and unaccounted for. An essay like hooks’s ‘How Can We Serve’ that provides a metadiscourse on care labour, might, then, be seen not only as a critical space for exploring the radical possibilities of care, but also, and perhaps most vitally, a form of radical care in itself.

The genre of university novel would seem an obvious place to start when looking for representations of immaterial and affective academic labour, with works such as Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), David Lodge’s *Nice Work* (1988), Donna Tartt’s *The Secret History* (1992), and, more recently, Netflix’s hit series *The Chair* (2021) bumping up against the complicated borderlines of academic service in their renderings of academic life and work. The university novel, according to Anna Bogen, is a term ‘widely used and seldom defined’ (2014: 9). She dates the genre back to middle ages but suggests it is primarily a nineteenth- and twentieth century phenomenon with most early examples set at Oxford and almost all depicting male characters. Bogen’s focus is on women’s university novels which she dates to the 1930s, and sees, like the male examples, as a kind of *bildungsroman* (11). Critical discussions of the academic novel are frequently concerned with the role of the university in the public sphere, seeing such novels either as a sideshow, interested in only the closed world of the institution, or an allegory for larger social issues. In a review of *The Chair*, Karen Tongson remarks that media depictions of ‘academia, and humanities professors in particular, tend to fail miserably because most of our drama unfurls as minutiae, as invisible labor that exacts its toll psychologically, in isolation, and behind the scenes’ (2021). The internal and intangible nature

of academic labour resists a traditional narrative arc and the insularity of academia risks rendering such work of little interest to a broader readership. Martin Paul Eve understands the relationship between the university and the university novel as antagonistic, positing a power game between the university wherein contemporary literary fiction contributes ‘to the ongoing displacement of cultural authority away from University English’ at a time when a new mass readership, outside of the academy, was emerging (2016: 12). Yet the academic novel also provides a critical space for exploring universities which are, moreover, crucially not only institutions that partake in and register broader social changes but also sites for reflection about the kind of world we want to live in.

Dorothy L. Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* and Barbara Pym’s *No Fond Return of Love* might seem somewhat odd examples of university novels upon which to focus. Both novels are formally ambiguous and generically hard to place, neither are wholly university novels. *Gaudy Night* is neither quite a detective nor a romance novel: there is no murder in the novel and the love interest does not even arrive until more than half way through the book. Sayers wrote to her publisher, Victor Gollancz, ‘whether you advertise it as a love-story or as educational propaganda, or as lunatic freak, I leave to you’ (1995: 357). *No Fond Return of Love* is both serious and satirical, taking the form of a love story but offering a romantic hero that not even the initially infatuated protagonist seems to be able to retain an interest in. Michael Cotsell describes it as an uneasy experiment with ‘the self-conscious and self-referring fiction of’ the 1960s (1989: 85). Though perhaps best defined as middlebrow, both novels marshal popular forms and genres to depict their female academics and are deeply concerned with intellectual matters. Their authors, who both graduated from Oxford University, occupied ambivalent positions in relation to academia. Sayers worked in publishing, copyediting, and translation, and published both popular and academic writing. Pym worked for many years at the International African Institute in London where she edited the anthropological journal *Africa*. Sayers’ and Pym’s marginal positions in relation to academia and literary culture makes these particularly interesting texts in their focus on the similarly marginal place of emotion in academic labour, and the formally slippery nature of both novels speaks to the struggle to find appropriate forms for representing affective labour.

### ***Women at the Modern University***

*Gaudy Night* was published at a pivotal moment in the history of the modern university: the demographics of both students and teachers were changing and there was, at the same time, increased debate around whether universities should provide the ‘liberal education of the whole

student' (Sagner Buurma and Hefferman 43) or focus on the pursuit of specialized, elite forms of knowledge. After the University of London became the first UK institution to award degrees to women in 1878, the number of women attending university rose steadily throughout the early twentieth century. By 1931 women made up almost 10% of staff and around 28% of students at higher education institutions.<sup>4</sup> Carol Dyhouse notes 'the very close links between the entry of women into higher education and the country's need for schoolteachers' (208) with institutions such as Queen's and Bedford catering to governesses and Whitelands College founded in 1841 as a teacher training college for 'a superior class of parochial schoolmistresses'.<sup>5</sup> Debates around education for women thus highlighted instrumental models of higher education, particularly the close links between university education for women and the more overtly caring professions of governess and schoolteacher, and were, moreover, connected to the increasing feminization of teaching professions.<sup>6</sup> Women's participation in higher education stalled in the late 1930s, with growth remaining slow until the 60s. According to Dyhouse, 'there is evidence to suggest that both teachers and students judged their position uncertain in the [20s and 30]s' (1995: 242).

Sayers was one of the first women to receive an Oxford education (she got a first in French from Sommerville College) and she audaciously situates her fictional Shrewsbury College in the exact location of Balliol's 'spacious and sacred cricket ground', turning a space of male leisure into a site for female education. Elizabeth English relates *Gaudy Night* to a slew of academic novels written by women in this period that address the 'question of women's right to learning' and contemporary debates about educational reform (2020: 30).<sup>7</sup> Rosemary Erickson Johnsen reads the novel more specifically as a response to *Three Guineas*, the long essay in which Virginia Woolf asks 'what sort of education' women will 'bargain' for and argues that 'education makes a difference' in shaping both literally and metaphorically the landscape in which we live (Woolf 1992: 182, 157). Sayers is generally more flattering to academics than Woolf, who was, as Beth Rigel Daugherty, Evelyn Chan and others have noted, sceptical about the value of professional teachers. In their focus on women's education, *Three Guineas* and *Gaudy Night* both attracted the ire of Queenie Leavis who said of *Three Guineas* that it repeated 'the regular complaint of outstanding women students: that there is a dearth of congenial intellectual company to be found in college', and attacked Sayers's pseudo-intellectual writing and the 'peepshow' she offered of the academic world, adding, 'universities are not the spiritually admirable places she alleges. People in the academic world . . . are not as a general thing wiser, better, finer' (1968: 144). 'What', Leavis asked is 'the value of this scholarly life Miss Sayers hymns if it doesn't refine the perceptions of those leading it?' For

Leavis, Sayers' middlebrow form, rosy-tinted view of academia, and romantic sensibilities rendered her work intellectually fraudulent and provided a damning indictment of what female education might produce.

***'Cursed with both Hearts and Brains': The Problem of Care in Gaudy Night***

The central, and unresolved, problem of *Gaudy Night* is how to reconcile academic integrity and human emotion. This problem is staged on the terrain of the modern university, through the choices of an array of women characters, and by means of a fusion of literary genres and styles. The novel is structured by two interrelated narrative threads. In the first, the protagonist, Harriet Vane, returns to her alma mater to solve a mystery and also to consider whether she will accept Peter Wimsey's marriage proposal or pursue a life of the mind in academia. The second narrative thread concerns the mystery Harriet is trying to solve: who is circulating a series of disturbing poison pen missives around Shrewsbury College. Harriet worries that the obscene letters and drawings will be fodder for critics of the college, fuelling prejudice about 'what lived in academic towers' and misogynistic clichés about "soured virginity" – "unnatural life" [and] "semi-demented spinsters" (88). Her investigation of the crime is not only done in the defence of but also under the auspices of female academic work: Harriet wins over the Junior Common Room with an academic lecture on 'Detection in Fact and Fiction' (152) and claims to be at Shrewsbury College working on a literary project on 'the life and works of Sheridan Lefanu', the Irish horror writer (149). Working on Lefanu is more than just a useful front as Harriet immerses herself in the research, finding that it provides the comfort of being 'a living part of a community engaged in a common purpose' (227). The project is not, however, only an escape or retreat from her work in the investigation; rather, Sayers comically weaves together Harriet's inwardly focused intellectual musings with her exterior life and professional responsibilities as detective when, while Harriet is writing about 'ghaisties', 'ghoulies' and Lefanu's mastery of 'the uncanny', we read, 'the lamp suddenly went out' and a voice in the darkness blames 'the poltergeist' (227-8).

At the end of the novel, we discover that the anonymous scribbler was neither, as suspected, one of the women academics who had become deranged nor a vengeful male critic of female education, but rather Annie, the scout, who sought revenge for her late husband whose academic career failed when he was caught destroying a manuscript that disproved his theories. His supervisor Miss de Vine (one of Shrewsbury's dons) reported him for academic dishonesty and, unable to face the fallout, he committed suicide. The criminal behaviour seems to be safely displaced from the academic women to a working-class woman on the margins of



and in service to academia. As a 'scout', Annie's job is literally to take care of the students and dons; she thus subverts and rejects her own institutional role as carer when she privileges her private loyalty to her husband over her professional duties. Annie attacks the academics, telling Miss de Vine, 'you killed him and you didn't care' (539) and declaring of the community of women scholars, 'None of them feel anything . . . there's nothing in your books about life and marriage and children . . . Nothing about desperate people – or love – or hate or anything human' (487). In a rather unsubtle commentary on her class status, Annie is captured in a coal-cellar while the aristocratic detective Peter Whimsey reveals her crimes to the gathered academics. As Annie is released from the coal hole and confronted with her actions she becomes 'half dreadful and half grotesque' in her rage and grief (542). Miss Barton offers 'some aspirin' to cure her hysteria while the other dons remain 'stupefied with the shock of seeing so many feelings stripped naked in public' (543). The care offered to Annie in her distress is depicted as both markedly unemotional – Miss Barton's 'brisk[ness]' 'galvanise[s]' the other academics – and, in the end, useless, for an aspirin is not an effective remedy for grief and anger. Both the crime and the attendant excessive emotions are relegated to the lower-class woman who, ironically in keeping with her job as scout, serves the fictional purpose of cleaning up the mess and, in the final pages Harriet judges the academics 'all normal again. They had never been anything else' (548).

Despite Annie's disdain of 'bit[s] of paper' (539), her poison pen scribbles constitute a kind of fictional production, creating a monstrous counternarrative to both the don's careful academic work and Sayers' redemptive portrayal of female academia as a whole. Harriet finds the first poison pen scribble 'fluttering untidily across the trim turf' of the quad (43). It is described as a 'childish drawing scrawled' on 'a sheet of common scribbling paper', 'a nasty, dirty and lunatic scribble' (43). The crude and careless nature of these scribbles that invade and disruptively circulate around Shrewsbury College contrasts with the depiction of academic labour as almost painfully conscientious and careful. For example, the 'magnum opus' that the English don, Miss Lydgate, is working on throughout the novel offers, 'an entirely new prosodic theory, demanding a novel and complicated system of notation which involved the use of twelve different varieties of type; and since Miss Lydgate's handwriting was difficult to read and her experience in dealing with printers limited, there existed at that moment five successive revises in galley form, at different stages of completion, together with two sheets in page-proof, and an appendix in typescript' (45). That the poison pen missiles are 'neither sane nor healthy' (43) evokes contemporary debates that saw university education as a threat to 'normal' female development and centred on health. These fears are the inverse of more recent

ideas that the humanities might offer a 'cure' to what ails us but both understand education in relation to illness and wellness. In the light of such fears, Bogen writes, 'Women's colleges took on a parental role; restrictive rules were imposed, not only about chaperonage and male visitors, but about exercise and the limitation of work' (2014: 15). *Gaudy Night* mocks and rejects women's duty to offer this kind of pseudo-maternal care. The dean complains about students who treat the faculty like their own mothers, castigating the 'untidy little beasts' who 'seem to think it's our job to sort out their miserable belongings. . .' (26). Harriet Vane refuses to offer 'womanly sympathy' (192) to a male undergraduate student, and when Peter Wimsey visits the college she parodies the care-giving function when she asks him 'Have you cleaned your teeth and said your prayers?' and he jokingly responds, 'Yes, mamma; and cut my nails and washed behind the ears' (355). Moreover, it is the fear of female education rather than education itself which is criminalized and depicted as transgressive and unhealthy. The binary between the two possible roles for women that the novel offers (caring mothers or professional academics) is disrupted when it is the maternal Annie who commits the crime.

*Gaudy Night* seems to offer a tentative resolution to how to balance intellect and emotion. Yet the debates about women's education in the novel do not, in the end, support either a dichotomy between or a comfortable resolution of intellect and emotion, work and care. While the warden asserts that 'no sane person could possibly think of blaming' Miss de Vine (543), the latter grants that 'one ought to take some thought for other people' in academic work (544). Harriet Vane similarly learns to allow room for emotion in her life, agreeing to marry Peter Wimsey. For Marya Mcfadden, the resolution of the novel does not satisfyingly lay to rest the threats and suspicions throughout; what matters is that for much of the narrative, 'everyone can be read as the possible author/culprit, and any number of possible motives ascribed to them' (2000: 364). The 'crimes' in the novel, which are not solely attributed to Annie, revolve around emotions which are either excessive or insufficient, both of which suggest a contortion of forms of care. Annie does not do her job when she attacks, rather than cares for, her charges, Annie's husband allows personal desires to cloud careful academic judgment when 'grown enamoured of his own theory' he produces fraudulent academic work (415), and Harriet cannot solve the crime because she is unable to approach the facts with 'an unprejudiced mind and undivided attention' (529). On the other hand, Miss de Vine does not take enough care with her student and Harriet's fear that 'it is dangerous to care for anybody' is portrayed as potentially damaging to Peter's health and well-being (543). The formal confusion between the detective novel and the romance plot disrupts further the categories of emotion and intellect. Even as Harriet chooses marriage over academia, the solution to both

the crime and to Harriet's romantic quandary involves using skills which are inherent, rather than antithetical to, good academic work. She must, Miss de Vine urges, 'bring a scholar's mind to the problem' of how to accept their love (546). Moreover, Peter solves the case through scholarly skills, including careful close reading of Annie's anonymous missives (525).

Ultimately, Sayers offers a redemptive model of care as attention. 'Fundamental mistakes', the Dean says, 'arise out of lack of genuine interest' (189). The word 'interest', so often seen as an empty, filler term without specific meaning accrues significant resonance throughout *Gaudy Night*, denoting at different times personal investment or preference, communal responsibility, and scholarly attentiveness. When Miss Shaw declares that it is a 'good thing to take an interest', this suggests a self-indulgent, almost prurient curiosity about her students, as she obsesses over their lives, sympathetically encourages confidences and imagines herself to be their friend. On the other hand, the Dean's formulation of 'genuine interest' suggests a careful attention that, for Sayers, is what makes a good friend, colleague, academic and, in the end, detective. Interest intertwines both reason and emotion, open mindedness and attentiveness. In her discussion of care and kindness in the neoliberal university, Sarah Burton asks, 'how small acts of – arguably transient – kindness can work to fix a set of long-term systemic exclusions and injustices' (2021: 23). *Gaudy Night* is full of such small acts of care, which are depicted as integral to the 'well-ordered' community life of the college and accumulate in building a radically caring community. Harriet helps the dons who, in turn, offer advice about the mystery as well her career and love life and support one another. The novel emphasizes care practices when the dean urges Harriet to rest, eat well, and read a nice novel, or when the dons arrange a series of patrols to protect one another. Such care is not only done in support of academic labour but is also shown to be an intrinsic part of it: for example, Harriet volunteers to help Miss Lydgate with the proofs for her book, pointing to editing as a kind of care labour.

Sayers's Shrewsbury College ultimately resembles Woolf's vision in *Three Guineas* for a reformed women's college that should draw its teachers 'from the good livers as well as from the good thinkers' (34). Sayers's understanding of the importance of comfort to intellectual labour also pokes fun at the austere authorities who, according to Vera Brittain lamented 'the ineradicable addiction of women undergraduates to coffee and cakes at n. a.m.' as a 'waste of time and money' (1960: 159). The different performances of and responses to care in Sayers's novel prefigure ongoing debates about women and care labour. *Gaudy Night* resists constructions of women's colleges as nothing but cocoa, gossip, and silliness, demonstrating the ways in which the paraphernalia of care was codified as intellectually soft.

On the other hand, the novel re-values care as something which is an intrinsic part of intellectual production rather than at odds with it, looking ahead to relational, feminist theories of care such as Carol Gilligan's understanding of an ethics of care as 'paying attention, listening, responding' (2011). When Peter asks Harriet what she will do about 'the people who are cursed with both hearts and brains?' (76), she initially maintains that one must 'choose' but by the end of the novel has learnt 'how hard it is for even the most powerful brain to be completely heartless' (69). Yet, the novel is, ultimately, ambivalent about the complicated relationships among the categories of gender, work, affect, and reason, revealing anxieties which are not quite put to rest but can rather only find a cautious compromise, even with a conclusion that solves the crime and offers a cautiously happy ending.

### **No Fond Return of Love: *Academic Expansion and Thankless Tasks***

Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love* was published in 1961, another period marked by seismic shifts in higher education when women's participation was again increasing. Pym, who graduated from St Hilda's College in Oxford in the 1930s, was the same generation as Sayers's fictional Shrewsbury College students and, in her engagement with middlebrow forms and her ambivalent attitude towards both emotion and academic labour in many ways seems a literary successor to Sayers. While Pym was shaped by her experience at St Hilda's, returning to it often in her fiction, *No Fond Return of Love* also looks forward, gesturing towards the academic expansion of the 1960s. The novel was published two years before the Robbins Report which recommended measures to make higher education 'available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment' (qtd. in Jones and Castle 1986: 290), leading to an increase in public funding alongside more universities and more of the population attaining full-time higher education. While Jennifer Jones and Josephine Castle credit the Robbins Report's recommendations with 'the increased participation rates of women in universities since 1965' (291), they argue that women's participation in higher education continued to be primarily restricted to 'more traditional areas of study' with women remaining underrepresented in upper levels of academia. More women may have been entering education but what were they being educated for? In *Gaudy Night*, Harriet studies the names of the undergraduates and thinks, 'so many destined wives and mothers of the race; or, alternatively, so many potential historians, scientists, school-teachers, doctors, lawyers' (127). In her first year of studies, Pym ruminated on the 'golden opportunities' that Oxford offered but concluded, 'Oh the perfect wife of an Oxford Moderator – that seems to be my true vocation' (qtd. in Rossen 1987: 23). Whereas Sayers posits a choice between academic work and marriage, for Pym the two muddle together.

*No Fond Return of Love* integrates academic, professional, and romantic problems in its depiction of educated women. While Oxford is a shimmering world of possibility for Harriet Vane, Pym is more interested in those women who neither find a home in nor leave behind academia but rather labour as editors and indexers ‘on the dustier fringes of the academic world’ (7). The novel opens at an academic conference which is described as an ‘unusual’ way of mending a broken heart (5). Here the protagonist, Dulcie, meets another part-time academic, Viola, as well as Dr Aylwin Forbes, a handsome but self-important and mediocre scholar with whom both Viola and Dulcie fall in love. The two women are foils for one another throughout the novel, with Viola both more pragmatic and expressing ambition and romantic passion that Dulcie simultaneously derides and slightly envies.

The two women, nonetheless, deploy similar skillsets in their pursuit of Aylwin Forbes. While Viola makes the index for Aylwin’s book for free – a sure sign of love for Dulcie who ‘can imagine few tasks more distasteful than making an index for someone for whom one no longer cares’ (79) – Dulcie uses the research skills from her degree in English Literature to, essentially, stalk Aylwin. Love, we read, ‘was a powerful incentive to this kind of research’ (43). The ‘interest’ that fuelled academic labour in *Gaudy Night*, here becomes obsession. The novel, originally titled *A Thankless Task*, also draws attention to the labour that women do under the guise of care and for little other payment than thanks in the acknowledgments page of a man’s book. Pym satirizes contemporary anxieties that education would take women away from traditional roles by depicting characters whose education is put entirely in the service of love and marriage. As Janice Rossen notes, ‘Dulcie’s education proves undeniably useful in capturing Aylwin. The ability to index and proofread and to track him down through consulting maps and reference books finally earns her the ideal marriage’ (1987: 295). Unable to free themselves from the demands of care labour, Pym’s academic women learn to manipulate them for their own purposes. They thus provide an apt illustration of Hoschchild’s gendered view of emotional labour whereby, ‘lacking other resources women make a resource out of feeling and offer it to men as a gift in return for the more material resources they lack’ (163). When Dulcie tells Aylwin that he needs a wife ‘who can appreciate your work and help you with it’ (252), he takes her words to heart and plans to propose after being rejected by her much younger niece, Laurel. At the end of the novel Dulcie has given up on love, reassuring herself that she ‘still had her work’ (284), when Aylwin calls, hiding his marital intentions ‘under the pretext of having some work that she might do for him’ (286).

Pym’s characters’ literary education affords them the skills to catch and care for an academic man, but it also fuels romantic sensibilities that make these women vulnerable to

exploitation, limiting rather than expanding their options. Aylwin Forbes is, after all, a dubious prize. With his beauty ‘like a Greek marble, or something dug up in the garden of an Italian villa’ (25), he is more appealing as an artistic object to study than a person to spend time with. What she yearns for the most is ‘a postcard’ from him (187). When Dulcie thinks she has lost Aylwin, she first feels ‘elated at the idea that life could change so completely’, and then ‘depressed’ at the lack of alternative options, seeing herself stuck in her flat becoming another spinster (284). Claire Barwise astutely sees Pym’s satires as offering feminist subversion ‘guised in the trappings of conventionality’ (2021: 54). Laura Doan observes the ‘continuous sounding of two narrative voices’ in Pym’s novels, ‘a voice politely civil’ and another that ‘speaks to challenge, even to ridicule’ (1988: 63-4). In *No Fond Return of Love*, this double voice articulates Dulcie’s barely acknowledged frustrations as someone whose work is always in the service of others. When walking home one night she notices, ‘A woman [who] wore a grey tweed coat and transparent pink nylon gloves, and carried two books from the public library in a contraption of rubber straps’, and she asks, ‘What is *the use* of noticing such details? . . . It isn’t as if I were a novelist or a private detective’ (emphasis mine, 61). Dulcie expresses desire to create ‘something of one’s own . . . even if it isn’t any good’ (39). The conference with which the novel begins features a chapel service where the attendants are told ‘how all work can be done to the Glory of God, even making an index, correcting a proof, or compiling an accurate bibliography’ and Dulcie thinks, ‘but there is more satisfaction in scrubbing a floor or digging a garden. . . One seems nearer to the heart of things’ (27). Dulcie’s frustration seems to be at an education which can find no purpose or, rather, is expected to be put to the service of something other than the self.

Dulcie’s labour is repeatedly shown to be far from ‘the heart of things’ (27). While *Gaudy Night* takes place almost entirely within the grounds of the fictional Shrewsbury College, *No Fond Return of Love* is an academic novel that never sets foot on a campus. Instead, the academic labour is transposed outside of the physical and institutional spaces of academia. The university comes to represent a lost time and space of promise to which both Pym and her female characters keep a tenuous connection but can never quite belong. The academic conference is held in a girls’ boarding school, suggesting the infantilization, feminization and commensurate diminishment of the labour of the people who ‘do all the rather humdrum thankless tasks for people more brilliant’ (7). Lacking an institutional space, Dulcie does her work at home – her books take up a shelf in the bathroom, ‘their covers now faded and buckled by steam’ – and in public spaces such as the public records office and library reading rooms. For Kerry Sinahan the novel is a ‘remodelling’ of the domestic woman (2014:

396) and, while this reading is convincing, we might also see *No Fond Return of Love* as an attempt to find a literary form capable of telling a different kind of story, one of women's intellectual and emotional labour. Much like Dulcie, who remains constrained by romantic fantasies even as she knows them to be damaging, the novel cannot seem to quite imagine this different kind of story but draws attention to its own fictional limitations. When Viola marries, Dulcie dismisses her as 'just a rather dull woman, wanting only to be loved . . . and she would forget all about making an index and searching for facts in libraries' (186); even Laurel, representing a younger generation, imagines no greater ambition than being 'secretary to a publisher' (50). If Sayers's Harriet masks deep felt emotion with a lack of affect, Pym's women disguise their cynicism with performances of romance. In many ways, moreover, Pym's novel is less optimistic than *Gaudy Night*, depicting the frustration of ambition.

Both *Gaudy Night* and *No Fond Return of Love* depict female academics carefully negotiating – respecting, rejecting, instrumentalizing, and transforming – the expectations placed upon them to perform care labour. They depict the university as simultaneously participating in and potentially offering a space of resistance to the commodification of care in modern working practices. These works raise questions about whether the academic sphere – and society more broadly – can be transformed by an ethics which values emotion and relationship building, or if such ethics of care may enable the exploitation of caregivers and valorize if not perpetuate a history of female exploitation. Both *Gaudy Night* and *No Fond Return of Love* offer unconvincing romantic happy endings that offer unsatisfactory resolutions to the complicated questions that the novels raise about the nature and purpose of education and labour. The romance plot is not, however, simply a Trojan Horse as the language and codes of emotion spotlight both the nature of the female characters' work and their relationship to it. In their generic indeterminacy, these novels evoke Virginia Woolf's idea, in *A Room of One's Own*, of a new kind of novel that would 'tampe[r] with the existing sequence' by depicting women who like one another and who work together (1992: 106). Sayers and Pym bend the form of the novel as they attempt to find an appropriate new shape to tell a story about women's emotional lives and work as well as the promises, purposes, and inevitable compromises of education.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion see Dasgupta, Peat, and Vogelaar, ‘Care in the Time of Covid-19: Accounting for Academic Care Labor’ forthcoming in *The Journal of Economic Issues*. My initial thinking about care labour in academia emerged through my conversations with Alison Vogelaar and Poulomi Dasgupta, and I am indebted to them for their many insights.

<sup>2</sup> While I use the general term ‘university’ here it’s true that different kinds of institutions, disciplines, and academic settings result in varied expectations for care labour.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Esarey and Valdes, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> For further details, see Dyehouse.

<sup>5</sup> History from the college website: <https://www.roehampton.ac.uk/colleges/whitelands-college/history/>

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth English notes that, according to the 1944 McNair report, women accounted for 70% of teaching profession, most in primary schools.

<sup>7</sup> As English and Bogen both remark, the Oxford novel is disproportionate in influence because less than one in ten female university students attended Oxford and Cambridge in the 1920s and 1930s, in part because of quotas. Moreover, these students remained more segregated because of the college system.