

## '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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To cite this article: Alexandra Peat (2023) '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*, *Women: a cultural review*, 34:4, 350-369, DOI: [10.1080/09574042.2023.2278273](https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2023.2278273)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2023.2278273>



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Published online: 15 Jan 2024.



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

*Abstract: This essay explores discourses of emotional labour in the university novel. It focuses on Dorothy L. Sayers’s Gaudy Night (1935) and 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. The essay pays particular attention to the various, shifting uses of the word ‘interest’, a phatic expression that connotes both affect and intellect, in depictions of emotional labour. While care has long been understood as a vital part of learning, thinking, and education, Sayers and Pym depict women academics who are ambivalent about performing emotional labour. These novels prefigure ongoing debates about whether*

*universities, and the public sphere more broadly, 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. As this essay considers how academic work has transformed in the wake of what Arlie Russell Hochschild terms the growth of the 'care sector', it explores the forms and affordances of academic emotional labour as well as the spaces, both institutional and symbolic, in which such labour is undertaken.*

*Keywords: care, intellectual labour, education, academic novel, emotional labour, interest*

**I**t's a good thing to take an interest', says one of Dorothy L. Sayers's fictional female academics in the 1935 detective novel, *Gaudy Night* (177). While Miss Shaw's 'interest' in the lives of her young students is satirized as intrusive over-involvement, it also signals Sayers's larger engagement, throughout *Gaudy Night*, with 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 profession for women. The novel also responds to cultural anxieties about the influence of women scholars on the modern university, anxieties that frequently touch upon questions of care. Sayers depicts 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. She ambivalently presents taking 'an interest' as the mark of both committed pedagogy and emotional indulgence, poising 'interest' between affect and intellect. *Gaudy Night* can thus productively be positioned in a larger dialogue about the role of emotion in academic or intellectual work, particularly for women academics, helping to historicize the cultural constructions of care labour that continue to underpin higher education.

From Aristotle's notions of good will in educating virtuous citizens to educational philosopher Nel Noddings'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.<sup>1</sup> 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

1 See, for example, Randall R. Curren's discussion of Aristotle's argument in *Politics* 'that schools and other public institutions should promote mutual goodwill, trust, and friendship' (Curren 2000: 215).

‘civic mission’, and ‘values’ marshalling a vocabulary of care which, some fear, is being 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 (2010). In offering a response to the commercialization of academia, Nussbaum’s work also reveals how deeply embedded concepts of care are in our understanding of education. 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). Following Whitehead, even without necessarily fully embracing Nussbaum’s idealistic advocacy of the humanities, we might see contemporary changes to higher education institutions as partaking in a larger ‘crisis of care’ that involves the concomitant devaluing of care work and the subsumption of caretaking within the gig economy (Hakim et al 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’ is being diminished in the contemporary university (Gill 2017: 106), then it is worth turning, I argue, to texts which offer a pre-history to our current crisis. Exploring the complicated imbrications of care and academic work will likely not offer a cure for the care crisis, but may reveal the various ways—exploitative, uncomfortable, recuperative—in which codifications of care have been strategically deployed by both academic labourers and institutions. As something both essential and auxiliary to academic work, care can thus be understood in terms of Jacques Derrida’s paradoxical logic of the supplement: an apparent addition or surplus that is also compensatory, revealing an existing lack (2011: 76). Considering what care reveals about the nature of academic work at the modern university, this essay turns to Sayers’s *Gaudy Night* and another unlikely academic novel, Barbara Pym’s 1961 *No Fond Return of Love*. Both Sayers and Pym share an understanding of taking ‘an interest’ that pertains not only to teaching but intellectual labour more broadly. While Sayers emphasizes liminality, situating women’s academic work ambivalently in tension between intellectual production and care labour, Pym spotlights the experience of marginality in her depiction of women academics who are both spatially and intellectually on the edges of academic life. In my discussion of both novels, I consider the forms that emotion 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 emotional labour is performed as well as its possible representational forms.

## *A 'Caring Profession': Forms for Academic Emotional Labour*

In *The Managed Heart* Arlie Russell Hochschild defines emotional labour as 'the management of feeling' that accrues an 'exchange value' and is then 'sold for a wage' (1983: 7). Unlike flight attendants (one of Hochschild's examples of the emotional labourer), academic workers are not, as a rule, asked to produce a sincere smile, but the successful execution of their job does require a range of emotional management, including performing empathy, hiding fatigue, or displaying neutral erudition. Hochschild posited that two thirds of modern workers had jobs requiring some degree of emotional labour, a statistic which is likely only to have increased with the growth of immaterial labour practices over the last decades; neither explicitly contracted nor compensated for, such 'shadow labor' 'does not quite count as labor but is nevertheless crucial to getting other things done' (167). Professionalized workers like academics do not, Hochschild explains, 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). Hochschild directly addresses academic work when, prefiguring more recent studies of the gendered (and racialized) discrepancies of teaching evaluations, she cites a 1976 study on 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).<sup>2</sup> Such studies suggest that in academia, as elsewhere, emotion management may be disproportionately allocated to some workers according to inherited academic ideals and normative ideas around gender, race, sexuality, and age.

Care has become an ideological battleground in the modern university, a word that signals both an exploitative second economy and more radical possibilities. On the one hand, the caring academic service worker risks becoming, to use a term also central to Emily Ridge's understanding of emotional labour in this special issue, a 'middleman' in the service of neo-liberal 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). For bell hooks, teaching is 'at its best ... a *caring profession*' (2003: 86, 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's

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Fan Y et. al who find gender and racial bias in student evaluations (2019), and Esarey and Valdes who explore the 'unacceptably high error rate' of course evaluations (2020: 1106).

vision of altruistic modes of service offers affective resistance to a modern university that has simultaneously devalued the carers and co-opted care. Rather than being 'mere icing on the cake of institutional maintenance' (84), 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, along with the intellectual work of 'black people in general, and black females in particular' is undervalued (87).<sup>3</sup> The ephemerality of emotional labour risks enabling exploitation when care becomes a job expectation disproportionately assigned and without explicit metrics or rewards. Yet it is also 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. hooks suggests that 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).

In *The Teaching Archive*, Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan note that the history of university 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 emotional labour. 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 emotional labour, though valuable, also serve to highlight the inherently nebulous and slippery nature of such work. While most discussions of academic emotional labour tend to focus on the care that teachers provide their students, Sara Burton offers a more holistic understanding that goes beyond teaching to consider nuanced constructions of collegiality, positing 'kindness' as 'multifaceted, paradoxical, and ambiguous sets of dispositions, acts, and ways of narrating the sociability of academic life' (2021: 22). Where, though, do we find documentation or representation of kindness or care in academic work? These 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 emotional labour is an essential component of research, from informal discussions and collaborations to editing and proofreading, it happens

3 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 many conversations with Alison Vogelaar and Poulomi Dasgupta, and I am indebted to them for their many insights as well as to Emily Ridge, the co-editor of this special issue.

behind the scenes and often goes unaccounted for and undocumented. 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. An essay like hooks's 'How Can We Serve' that provides a metadiscourse on emotional 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 university novel is an intuitive form with which to begin exploring representations of immaterial and affective academic labour. Works such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), John Williams's *Stoner* (1965), David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988), Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992), and, more recently, Netflix's hit series *The Chair* (2021) bump up against the complicated borderlines of academic service in their renderings of academic life and work.<sup>4</sup> 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 immaterial 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; he argues that 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 in which we want to live.

The two academic novels that this essay is concerned with, Dorothy L. Sayers's *Gaudy Night* and Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love*, offer somewhat odd examples of the genre. It is, indeed, their very oddness that makes them such evocative examples of the struggle to represent emotional labour. Both are formally ambiguous and generically hard to place. *Gaudy Night* is neither quite a detective nor a romance novel: there is no murder and the love interest does not even arrive until more than halfway 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' (Reynolds 1995: 357). *No Fond*

4 Throughout the essay, I use the term 'academic novel' or 'university novel' rather than the narrower, because of its site-specific designation, 'campus novel.' The university novel, according to Anna Bogen, is a term 'widely used and seldom defined' (2014: 9). She dates the genre back to the 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 *bildungsroman* (11).

*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*. As Sayers and Pym write about academia from the margins, the formally slippery nature of these works encapsulates both the challenge of finding appropriate forms for representing affective labour and the equally liminal and shifting place of emotion in academic work.

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

*Gaudy Night* was published at a pivotal moment in the history of the modern university: the demographics of both students and teachers were changing at the same time as debate was increasing around whether universities should provide the 'liberal education of the whole student' (Sagner Buurma and Hefferman 43) or focus on the pursuit of specialized 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>5</sup> Carol Dyhouse notes the links between more women entering higher education and an increased need for teachers (2006: 50–51) 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>6</sup> As teaching professions became increasingly feminized, advocates for female education highlighted its role in supplying the more overtly caring professions of governess and schoolteacher.<sup>7</sup> Yet women's participation in higher education stalled in the late 1930s, with growth remaining slow until the 60s, and, according to Dyhouse, 'there is evidence to suggest that both teachers and students judged their position uncertain' (1995: 242).

5 For further details, see Dyehouse.

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

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



Sayers was one of the first women to receive an Oxford education (she got a first in French from Somerville 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 women's education. Elizabeth English relates *Gaudy Night* to other academic novels written by women in this period that address the 'question of women's right to learning' (2020: 30).<sup>8</sup> Rosemary Erickson Johnsen (2015) reads the novel more specifically as a response to *Three Guineas*, in which Virginia Woolf asks 'what sort of education' women will 'bargain' for and argues that 'education makes a difference' in literally and metaphorically shaping our lived landscape (Woolf 1992: 182, 157). Sayers is generally more flattering to academics than Woolf, who was, as Beth Rigel Daugherty (2022), Evelyn Chan (2014) 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's middlebrow form, rosy-tinted view of academia, and romantic sensibilities rendered her work intellectually fraudulent and provided a damning indictment of what women's education might produce.

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 women-only college, fuelling prejudice about 'what lived in academic towers' and misogynistic clichés about "soured virginity"—"unnatural life" [and] "semi-demented spinsters" (Sayers 88). Her investigation of the crime is done not only in defence of but also under the auspices of

8 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.

female academic work: Harriet wins over the Junior Common Room with a very metafictional 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 provides neither escape nor retreat from her work in the investigation; rather, Sayers comically weaves together Harriet's inwardly focussed 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 an unidentified voice in the darkness blames 'the poltergeist' (227-8). The generic expectations of the gothic form are both set and sent up when mystery is revealed to be a banal blown fuse, the result of human rather than ghostly misdeeds.

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 unobvious 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). One of the dons, 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 an ineffective 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 academic women's mess and, in the final pages, Harriet judges the academics 'all normal again. They had never been anything else' (548).

The troubling presence of the scribbling poltergeist is not, however, as easily resolved as Harriet suggests. Despite Annie's disdain for 'bit[s] of paper' (539), her poison pen scribbles constitute a kind of fictional production, creating a monstrous counternarrative to both the dons' careful academic work and Sayers's redemptive portrayal of female academia as a whole. Harriet finds the first note '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).

The poison pen missives are not the product of academic work and are posited in counterpoint to it. 'Neither sane nor healthy' (43), these texts also satirize and offset contemporary anxieties that university education constituted a threat to 'normal' female development, for it is Annie's horror of female education rather than education itself which is depicted as transgressive and unhealthy. Such fears are the inverse of more recent ideas that the humanities might cure what ails us, but both understand education in relation to illness and wellness. In the 1930s, 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 such 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 ...' (Sayers 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). 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 in defence of a husband whose career has ostensibly been destroyed through the interference of female academics. *Gaudy Night* thus presents a complicated ethical scenario in terms of both gender and class in which the gendered anxieties around how emotion may disrupt the work of female academics are only superficially resolved by displacing both the anxieties and the emotion itself on to a domestic service worker.

*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) for her student's suicide, 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. I concur with Marya Mcfadden that the novel's resolution does not satisfyingly lay to rest the suspicions throughout much of the narrative in which '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 cannot solely be attributed to Annie, concern 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 judgement when 'grown enamoured of his own theory', he produces fraudulent academic work (Sayers 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 whose punishment does not fit the crime and Harriet's fear that 'it is dangerous to care for anybody' is portrayed as potentially damaging to Peter and herself (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 the use of 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).

Sayers offers a redemptive model of care as attention in line with Nel Noddings's assertion that 'the *carer* is first of all *attentive*' (2012: 771, emphasis in original). 'Fundamental mistakes', Sayers's dean says, 'arise out of lack of genuine interest' (189). For Sianne Ngai, the word 'interesting' can denote 'a more *active* form of attention' that 'makes a tension between wonder and reason' (2012: 129, 130, emphasis in original). The word 'interest', so often seen as a 'phatic buzzword' (Ngai 110) without specific meaning, accrues multiple meanings 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 in' her students, this suggests a self-indulgent, almost prurient curiosity: she obsesses over their dresses and lives, encourages confidences, and imagines herself to be their friend (Sayers 177). In contrast, 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; it both centres the self who experiences or expresses interest and turns a focus onto an other (Ngai 130).

Sayers's Shrewsbury College resembles Woolf's vision in *Three Guineas* of a reformed women's college that should draw its teachers 'from the good lives as well as from the good thinkers' (34). 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, radical in part because it offers an alternative to the romantic dyad or the family unit. Harriet helps the dons who, in turn, offer advice about the mystery as well her career and love life, and support one another. Sayers 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, done in support of academic labour, is also 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. *Gaudy Night* simultaneously resists constructions of women's colleges as nothing but cocoa, gossip, and silliness—a criticism of 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)—and subverts the implicit codification of such paraphernalia of care as intellectually soft. The novel thus re-values care as 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 intersections of gender, class, work, affect, and reason, revealing anxieties which are not quite put to rest but find, rather, a cautious compromise.

### ***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 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, furthermore, 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* blends 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 concerned with 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’ (1981: 7). Pym’s novel thus imagines both the consequences of widening access to higher education and the emergence of an academic precariat. 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-importantly mediocre scholar with whom both Viola and Dulcie fall in love. The two women are foils for one another: Viola expresses ambition and romantic passion that Dulcie simultaneously derides and slightly envies. They nonetheless deploy similar skill sets in their pursuit of Forbes. While Viola happily makes the index for Aylwin’s book for free—a sure sign of her enduring love, according to 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 a romantic obsession.

Pym’s novel, originally titled *A Thankless Task*, draws attention to the labour that women do under the guise of care and for little other payment than ‘some kind of acknowledgement in the foreword’ of a man’s book (79). 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 these demands for their own purposes. They thus provide an apt illustration of Hochschild’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). After Aylwin has been rejected by Dulcie’s much younger niece Laurel, Dulcie tells him 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 to her. 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 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 than a person to spend time with. Dulcie compares her 'genuine interest' in Aylwin to that of 'a bona fide research worker [who] may be granted access to private letters or diaries'. Interest, as Ngai argues, 'is described as both strong and weak, as both enduring and fleeting, as both a libidinal desire and also the dispassionate antithesis of passion' (130), and Dulcie's 'interest' in Aylwin expresses desire at the same time as it transmutes that feeling into dry academic engagement. What she yearns for the most is not an intimate encounter but rather 'a postcard' from him (187), an object that would both prove his interest in her and provide material for her to analyse.

Claire Barwise astutely sees Pym's satires as offering feminist subversion 'guised in the trappings of conventionality' (2022: 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 in a 'grey tweed coat and transparent pink nylon gloves, [who] 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 stems from an education which produces nothing and finds no purpose or, rather, is expected to be always put to service.

Dulcie's labour is far from 'the heart of things' (27), a term which simultaneously evokes and displaces emotion. 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 depicted in the novel's opening chapter is held in a girls' boarding school, suggesting the infantilization and diminishment of the labour of the women 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' (76)—and in public spaces such as the public records office, library reading rooms, and telephone booths. This depiction seems to pre-empt the spatial and institutional marginalization of the precarious work forces attached to today's universities.

For Kerry Sinahan, the novel presents a 'remodelling' of the domestic woman (2014: 396); we might equally 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 rather than domestic labour. Much like Dulcie, who remains constrained by romantic fantasies even as she knows them to be damaging, the novel cannot seem to quite achieve this different story and draws attention to its own fictional limitations. Whereas Sayers's caring community of scholars offers an alternative kinship to that of the family or romantic dyad, Pym's educated women are uncomfortably thrown together and do not seem to like one another very much. Dulcie, Viola, and Laurel briefly share a house but, we read, that 'the cosy student tea-parties ... had not so far materialized' (120). 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 the 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.

### ***Conclusion: Removating Care***

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 novels question 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 perpetuate the exploitation of caregivers. Both *Gaudy Night* and *No Fond Return of Love* offer unconvincing romantic happy endings and 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. While Sayers adapts the detective novel to the immaterial mysteries of academic labour, Pym's novel deploys sharp cynicism in the guise of a supposedly soft middlebrow genre. In their generic indeterminacy, these novels evoke Woolf's hope, in *A Room of One's Own*, for a new kind of novel that would 'tampe[r] with the existing sequence' by depicting women who like one another and who work together or, in the case of Pym's women, who do not always like one another but nevertheless work in uneasy collaboration (Woolf 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.

Higher education is currently experiencing another moment of significant transition—perhaps even of contraction—as narrowly instrumentalist definitions of the use-value of education jeopardize in particular the future of the arts and humanities. In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2003), Alicia Andrzejewski (2023) likens contemporary academia to a haunted house 'crumbling around us.' Extending the metaphor, she writes of 'desperately trying to renovate—to make the whole place safer, more welcoming', adding, 'we take on this labor because renovating is the professional thing to do'. Significantly, Andrzejewski posits tending to the spaces in which we labour as both ethically valuable work and 'professional' responsibility. Such cultivation shapes, moreover, the kinds of people who do the work as well as the kinds of work that gets done. Taken together *Gaudy Night* and *No Fond Return of Love* chart one possible story of the modern university and the evolving place therein of women academics. While the perspective of these two white, English, Oxford-educated authors is undeniably limited, their novels nonetheless not only depict the gendered and class-based expectations around emotional labour but also suggest how such expectations can be punctured, subverted, or turned to radical new purposes. Ironic and ambivalent, neither novel is idealistic, yet they each retain tentative hope in the pleasures of intellectual work and gesture towards the unfulfilled potential of an attentive academic community.

## ***Disclosure Statement***

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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