



Discourse and Social Realities: Assessing dorothy L. Sayers' *The Man Born to be King*

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Abstract

The proposed paper is going to delve in an assessment of the language used in Dorothy L. Sayers' *The Man Born to be King* and contextualizing the same. This 1943 play comes in the midst of several hard hitting realities, the foremost of which is to grapple with the ongoing World War II. The play deals with the various episodes in Christ's life from nativity to his Crucifixion and finally, his resurrection. A text of the high modernist era, it is the most interesting in its use of "modern English" and the language of "flesh-and-blood" people, to quote Sayers. Substituting Bible English, the Sermons and episodes, as recounted in the New Testament, to create a new literature of sorts, gave rise to several criticisms. The research objective in this paper will be to study the dynamics of recreating a canonical text, dramatizing it in a new language—a language suited not only to the times but also to the tastes and sensibilities of the people of that era. Dealing with a religious text, reinventing it, infused with the playwright's own imagination and contextualizing it according to the social realities of the time manipulated by language is a commendable feat. Sayers' use of language in her much celebrated *The Man Born to be King* will be the focus of this paper.

Keywords: language, Bible, humanism, theology, reworking

1. Introduction

Language has a certain function in society. It is crucial in making and unmaking social relationships. It is through language that a sense of commonality is established. Language sets a marker for the contemporariness of the times. Language posits unique challenges in different discourses. It is through language that one may refashion contexts and rework one discourse into another. Dorothy L. Sayers attempts to execute the same in her play *The Man Born to be King*, a recreation of the biblical story, to suit modern sensibilities. The Bible, its moral lessons and stories, is no longer limited in the realm of the religious in the hands of Sayers but finds a literary and social outlook. Transforming religious discourse into the social was what J. W. Welch, a BBC producer, considered to be of primary importance in a war torn Britain of the 1940s. Faith, belief and the very notion of God had become obsolete; the language of God and religious discourse fell into disuse with the increasing acts of violence and subsequently, an increasing number of atheists. "God was no longer a factor to be reckoned with in making decisions and the language of religion had lost most; and for some people all, of its meaning. Especially was this true of the Authorized Version. Everywhere was a great ignorance of Christian Faith" (Garber). It was the need of the hour to bring God back into the lives of the people of a failing nation and thus he entrusted Sayers with the "great evangelistic enterprise" (Garber) to retell the miraculous events of the life of Christ. *The Man Born to be King* was initially aired as a radio play from 1941 to 1942 and was published in printed form in 1943. In twelve episodes, it retells the biblical events from the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to his Crucifixion and, finally, his resurrection. Sayers' intention was that "the story of Christ [be] handled, not liturgically or symbolically, but realistically and historically" (Brown 260). The use of

modern English instead of fustian, high-flown language and "credible characters who demonstrated the machinations of the contemporary world" (Curran 73) helped her achieve the feat.

Sayers was a devout Christian all her life. The only daughter of Reverend Henry Sayers, her entire outlook of life was based on Christian principles so much so that she "recognized the Incarnation of Christ, His life, His death, and His resurrection as the most important landmark in the history of the world" (Brown 260). However, this was punctuated with her humanism and Christ, to her, was not God incarnate but a man of utmost virtues—he was not a distant, rigid and stand-alone figure in a fixed historical temporality, but an "easy and comfortable version of him" (Brown 275). Sayers aimed to portray "not only Man-in-general and God-in-His-thusness, but also God-in-His-thisness of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting who walked and talked then and there surrounded not by human types, but by those individual people" (Sayers 5). Christ no longer preaches from a lofty distance in a spiritual manner; his exhortation in the Gospel: "ye eat the flesh of the Son of God" becomes, in Sayers' text, "eat noisily, like an animal" (Sayers 9), referring to the physical act of munching on the wafer, symbolic of the body of Christ. It was her intent to disturb the complacent nature of her countrymen by the "blunt new word" (Sayers 9) for that, she believed, "will impress us more than the beautiful and the old" (Sayers, 9). Matthew is "as vulgar a little commercial Jew as ever walked Whitechapel" (Sayers 113) and in a Cockney accent he teaches us how not be gullible: "Fact is, Philip my boy, you've been had for a sucker....If I was to tell you the dodges these fellows have up their sleeves, you'd be surprised" (Sayers 117). Such "Gangsterism" of language in a religious play, as *The Daily Herald* called it, was deliberate on the part of Sayers for she wanted to

explore the full humanity of Christ and the naturalness of his surroundings and relate the contemporary socio-political conditions with that of Christ's: "The men of a past epoch spoke and thought about things as we do....But nothing is gained by making them use obsolete forms of speech" (Sayers 8). The antiquated language was a big barrier to the understanding of the Bible and spiritual curiosity was dampened with the overtly familiar language. The word of God had to be made accessible to a new readership in a novel fashion and Sayers' text shocked its readers and made them think anew of their God.

Language helped in the re-imagining of a religion, the unmaking of the sacrosanct and giving it the necessary universality. Language helps in making Sayers' text realistic—the events are portrayed in such a way that the sublime seemed the commonplace yet, at the same time, the language is such that "it can jolt itself to the language of prophecy from time to time" (Sayers 8). Language, in Sayers' hands, does not merely have propositional content, it becomes "empirically verifiable" (Scott). Religious discourse has often been criticized on grounds of Reductionism. The preachings, no longer, are in the form of speech acts or illocutionary acts but are fleshed out with a contemporary meaning. Meaning is altered and generated in order to suit the sensibilities of the contemporary masses. What is being represented in talking of God is a "particular aspect that gives to any specific perception its provisionality, its openness to being represented afresh" (Williams 148). Language helps in imparting a human quality to the figure of Christ—a Christology that bestows a full humanity to him. The task of making the characters "vivid and human" (Goody 83), to present in them the authenticity of times, is brought about by the use of language.

Sayers says in her Introduction to the text that the characters of Jesus and Mary are made to speak Standard English while the multitudes "speak rough" (Sayers 10). Among the disciples, Matthew has a Cockney resonance while Peter, being the Galilean peasant that he was, speaks in a rough tone. The interplay of different mannerisms is brought about by the language of the different characters. While Herod, a political genius and an autocrat, seeks to assert his power in the face of imminent threat from the boy who is born: "Fools! May their own prophecies choke them! But there is danger—very grave danger. No matter. Old as he is, Herod will ride out this storm too" (Sayers 34), the driver, a plebian and choric character gives his view thus: "I don't hold with all this preachifying" (Sayers 24) and "Good luck! And steer clear of politics" (Sayers 24). The lofty is introduced by the Magi, as evident in the lines of Melchior or Caspar, "Show us him that is born King of the Jews" (Sayers 32) and "We are Magi, humble searchers after the hidden wisdom" (Sayers 32). This is a ploy used by the playwright to denote the several layers of society and the people that inhabit those layers. The difference is made apparent by the lofty and the plebian in the language. The use of such language that exudes power as that of Herod or the Cockney and East End dialects gives the text a universal dimension. The religious is no longer the distant—the dogma is the drama—and the "use of modern speech and a determined historical realism about the characters" (Sayers 7) helps in relating the biblical events to the contemporary for we find in both "a corrupt church, a timid politician, and a fickle proletariat led by professional agitators" (Sayers 7).

For Sayers, "right in art is right in practice" (Sayers 4) and being restricted to the sacrosanctity of the words in the Bible in such a way that "they must not be expanded, interpreted, or even added to" (Sayers 2) denies the artist the full freedom to approach the text. It is therefore, by subverting the very language of the Bible that Sayers reclaims the religious unto herself; the religious is now the dramatic, the literary and the "drama of His life is dogma shown as dramatic action" (Sayers 5). Literature and theology find a harmonious amalgamation in Sayers' text and the understanding of the modern audience of their scripture is enriched by such a rendition. Theology finds expression through new language, new interpretation; religion is no longer objective but a subjective experience. Sayers attempted to elucidate the real in the literary and used language so that "the Timeless irrupted into time" (Sayers 10). Social reality and its representation through a recreation of biblical stories find execution through the use of language. The language used sets forth a new discourse that helps in enriching man's understanding of not only the social but also the religious.

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