

Dogma, Drama, and History in Dorothy Sayers's *The Emperor Constantine* (1951)

“It is only with the confident assertion of the creative divinity of the Son that the doctrine of the Incarnation becomes a real revelation of the structure of the world. And here Christianity has its enormous advantage over every other religion in the world. It is the *only* religion that gives value to evil and suffering. It affirms—not, like Christian Science, that evil has no real existence, nor yet, like Buddhism, that good consists in a refusal to experience evil—but that perfection is attained through the active and positive effort to wrench a real good out of a real evil.”—*Creed or Chaos?* (1941)

“The formulation of a creed is desirable in order that the Church may understand her own mind and put her opinion on record. Otherwise she may find that what people are teaching in her name is no longer Christianity, but has insensibly turned into something quite different. If you study the history of the Creeds, you will find that their clauses are all directed to safeguarding the Faith against some perversion which was creeping in—nearly always due, originally, to over-emphasis upon some point which was sound enough if kept in its proper place. The “homoöusios” clause, for instance, maintaining that the Son is God equally with the Father, was necessitated because the Arians, in their anxiety to maintain the Son’s distinct personality, were asserting that He was a *created* being (rather like the Platonic demi-urge). This, if persisted in, would have overthrown the very nature of Christianity, since, if Christ is a creature it would be idolatry to worship him.

“To check up one’s theology by the Creeds is the best plan I know for being sure that what one is thinking, saying, or writing, is actually Christianity, and not some private religion one has invented out of one’s own taste and fancy, which are so apt to run away with one. I might add that a little more acquaintance with the Creeds would enable readers to distinguish more readily than they do between “Miss Sayers’s ideas” and traditional doctrine! At present, people continually mistake some analogical illustration of my own imagining for the doctrine it illustrates, while at the same time supposing that authoritative pronouncements eighteen centuries old are startling new inventions of my own.”
—Letter to Miss G. F. Littleboy, 19 February 1951

Historical Background

- 284-305 Emperor Diocletian permits the Roman Empire to be divided into a Western and Eastern half; this includes a system of a senior emperor (Augustus) in the East and a junior one in the West, each with a junior caesar underneath them.
- 303 Beginning of Diocletian’s “Great Persecution” against Christianity
- 305 Diocletian abdicates; sets off a series of rivalries among the emperors and caesars for imperial control.
- 308 Constantine named Caesar of the West
- 311 Constantine declares the Edict of Toleration
- 312 The Battle of Milvian Bridge: Constantine declared the Emperor of the West
- 313 Emperor Constantine issues the Edict of Milan, thus recognizing the legality of Christianity within the Roman Empire
- 318 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*
- 319 Beginning of Arian Controversy
- 324 Constantine defeats Licinius and becomes sole emperor
- 325 Council of Nicaea (First Ecumenical Council)--Against Arianism, the view that Christ is the first of God the Father's created beings, the council affirms that Christ is of the same substance with the Father.

- 326 Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*; Constantine has Crispus, his son, executed, then Fausta, his current wife and *Augusta*.
- 328-330 Founding of Constantinople, seat of eastern empire, eventually to become of the imperial seat of the Byzantine Empire
- 337 Death of Constantine

Plot Overview

Prologue (p.30)

The Church speaks of her birth and rise to power and the crowns that have come with it, as well as a request for prayer that she might be beatified.

Act I: The Empire of the West (pp.31-84)

Scene 1 (AD 305)—King Coel's palace at Colchester: Flavius's reunion with Helena; introduction to the 21-year-old Constantine; Coel's prophecy of Constantine's future

Scene 2 (AD 306)—York: The army's election of Constantine as Augustus (though he will only be allowed a role as Caesar at first)

Scene 3 (AD 307)—Gaul: Maximian's alliance with Constantine; marriage to Fausta, along with background as to Constantine's first marriage and son, Crispus; Helena's insight into the political marriage

Scene 4 (AD October 312)—A field in Italy: Comic discussion among soldiers as to the political maneuvers of the last five years. The sign of the Chi-Ro for Constantine's forces; nature of Constantine's vision

Scene 5 (AD 27 October 312)—On the road to Rome: The prayer to the One God

Scene 6 (AD 28 October 312)—The Imperial Palace at Rome: The victory at the Milvian Bridge; the concern within the palace and Livia's political about-face; the Edict of Milan and Constantine's first-sense that the Christian God claims total worship.

Act II: The Empire of the East (pp.85-129)

Scenes 1-2 (AD 1-2 March 317)—Palace in the Balkans: A gathering of upper-class women (provides a sense of the religious divisions among people); Fausta's unwise friendship with Marcia, who is allied with Licinius; Constantia, sister of Constantine, introduced.

Scene 3 (AD 323)—A house in Rome: A pagan poetry contest that mocks the Christians while revealing the circle's own cultural decadence. Contrasted with the doctrinal debate between Arius and Athanasius [as a kind of example of a larger growing fight]

Scenes 4-6 (AD 324)—Battle outside Byzantium: The defeat of Licinius by Constantine; Constantine's victory under Christ's Labarum; Togi's role in battle.

Scene 7 (AD 324)—Nicomedia: The debate over Arius is explained and why it is important; how it is important among the people in the streets

Scene 8 (AD 324—1 day later)—Nicomedia: Fausta's anger with Constantine; Constantia's desire to escape the pull of power; Crispus's pride in military success. The *Hippolytus* as a foreshadowing.

Scene 9 (AD June 324)—Nicomedia: The theological debate and its importance is further explained—why Christ must be fully God from eternity. Constantine and his council make plans for an ecumenical council to be held at Nicaea; the nature of Church and State .

Act III: The Empire of Christ (pp.130-203)

Scene 1 (AD May 325)—Nicomedia: Preparations for the Council, especially the choice of introducing *homoöusios*; the gifts of the Church and the Lord of History

Scenes 2-3 (AD May 325)—A barber shop in Nicaea: Comic scene that includes a debate over Arianism

Scenes 4-5 (AD 20 May 325)—Nicaea, anteroom and council chamber: The gathering of the Council and the debate; the compromise position advocated by Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea. The wonder (and gratitude) to Constantine for legalizing Christianity; the heart of the debate between Arius and Athanasius; the discussion over the wording of the Creed; the introduction of *homoöusios* and the vote to adopt it.

Scene 6 (AD July 325)—Nicaea; imperial garden: Helena and Martibena's fear as to what Fausta's hatred will lead; Fausta's modern attitude

Scene 7 (AD July 325)—Nicaea: Constantine's plan to transfer the imperial seat to Byzantium

Scene 8 (AD 326)—Rome, an anteroom in the Palace: Crispus is set-up by Marcia and Fausta

Scene 9 (AD 326, next morning)—Rome, room at the Palace: Martibena and Togi uncover the plot

Scene 10 (AD 326)—Constantine's lodging at Pola: Constantine believes the accusations against Crispus and has him executed; Togi arrives too late with the evidence and confronts Constantine with his humanity as a sinner. The political actions that Constantine must take.

Scene 11 (AD 326)—Rome, a small chapel, then before the crowds: Constantine confesses his sin to Helena, and she undertakes to find the True Cross; Fausta is told of her fate before they enter into the procession.

Epilogue (pp.204-208)

(AD Whitsun Eve 337)—Nicomedia, in the Palace: Constantine's deathbed baptism with a recap of King Coel's prophecy and the Nicene Creed.

History and Theatre

Arguably, most theatre and history share a commitment to narrative. Both rely on a temporal structure with a direction towards a particular end that shapes the events leading up to it. Each is trying to guide us to a particular understanding through the presentation of a series of events. Every historical account requires the judgment of the historian or historians as to what happened and why based on the various kinds of evidence that have survived into the present. Theatre, on the other hand, is typically fiction, but it, too, builds its art upon the unfolding of a plot with key events and actors. Both narrative forms have to pick and choose which elements to include, the speed and detail by which they are represented, and the relative importance of various actors and background in explaining what happened and why.

As to the differences, the historian has a responsibility to what is judged as actually happening, while the author of a dramatic script is more concerned with the artistic qualities that make the good story, which can range across a number of genres and styles and be dependent upon differing approaches to drama. Admittedly, theatre also has other aspects that set it apart. The stage carries with it a number of visceral qualities that are not automatically required for good history, but are necessary for moving theatre. And it has an immediacy that impinges on the audience in a way that even the most vivid history-writing does not.

Historical fiction (whether it be a novel, a play, or a film) falls somewhere in between fact and fiction. There are the questions as to what might be called the historical accuracy of period behavior and whether the events that are being portrayed actually happened, and the production of an historical play can make various decisions as to the accuracy of costumes, sets, props, and so on.. It has been argued that readers of history do not follow their narrative accounts in the same way as readers of fiction. In the latter case, readers approach the story with imperfect knowledge, a sense of anticipation, and must remain open to the unanticipated and unexpected. In the case of the history-reader, however, the ideal reader already approaches the text with at least some sense of what has happened, even if perhaps hoping for new information or a new approach to the traditional evidence. Of course, the case can be made that these overlap more than some are willing to admit. Historical fiction forces us to consider this overlap between an account of the past and a story about some aspect of the past. In particular, historical fiction offers the adept reader (or audience) at least five levels of interaction with the past:

1. *A veracity to certain historical accounts, causes, and details* that seeks to accurately portray what happened, though this may involve choosing one historical account over another.
2. *An elasticity of verisimilitude* in which certain persons or events are conflated or in which certain actions are created to represent general trends or attitudes.
3. *A responsibility to the "spirit" of the past* in which the fictional events portrayed nonetheless match up with the general knowledge of the past.
4. *A "modern" stand-in in terms of speech or dress or action*, which the audience is trusted as able to navigate for humor or adventure's sake.

5. *The clearly fictional referents* which are guided by dramatic rather than historical concerns. Ideally, the audience is expected to know when the plot elements are created for reasons other than historical representation.

Admittedly, this can become complicated when audiences cannot be expected or required to know the liberties that the fictional account is taking. It can become even more complicated if the writer creates a fictional “answer” to an open historical question, that is cases in which historians are limited to conjecture or a simple admission of ignorance as to what happened or why.

Discussion Question: How does Sayers practice the five levels of interaction mentioned above? (cf. Preface, pp.23-26). How accurate do you consider her play? Upon what grounds?

Event and Experience

Sayers in her 1944 Edward Alleyn Lecture, “Towards a Christian Aesthetic,” brings together a distinction from R. G. Collingwood’s *The Principles of Art* (1938) with her own argument from *The Mind of the Maker* (1941). She borrows his distinction between the false art of entertainment and propaganda and that of art proper as being creative and imaginative and adds to it her picture of a creativity that is triune in structure. The creative act of the artist is made up of “experience, expression, and recognition.” By experience, Sayers means more than the event which happens to someone; it is rather a recognition of a truth of a particular nature which is both surprising and yet in retrospect familiar. And it happens in the process of creative expression. In similar fashion, the audience can experience a creative recognition by virtue of the artist’s work. This kind of creative, revelatory art, Sayers claims, has a civilization-strengthening impact, while art as simple entertainment can corrupt the consciousness of a people, producing an escapist culture without a basis in reality. In turn, art as propaganda can falsify the consciousness of a people, producing behavior that is not embodied in true character. Sayers says these misuses of false art are idols rather than the true image-bearing function of true art.

Discussion Question: Given the triangulation of dogma, drama, and history in *The Emperor Constantine*, at what levels can the play be said to achieve a recognition of truth? On the other hand, could it be charged that the play is simply entertainment and/or propaganda? Why and/or why not?

Additional Discussion Questions

1. How are the political ambitions of Constantine intertwined with the domestic rivalries and hatreds of the imperial family, as well as the doctrinal battle at Nicaea I?
2. What are some ways that Sayers seeks to uncover the dramatic in Constantine’s history?
3. Likewise, how does she seek to display the seriousness and drama in the Arian debate?
4. How does Helena grow as a character in our estimation?
5. How does Constantine grow as a character? Do any other characters undergo serious change?
6. Besides the doctrinal debate, what other major themes underwrite the plot?
7. What does the play suggest about the cultural state of the Empire before and after Christianity?