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ESSAY



Framing and Shaming Harriet Vane: Toxic Justice in Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison*

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Abstract. This article examines Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* (1930), focusing specifically on the novel's critique of justice for women under patriarchy. Representations of justice and its subversion are analyzed, focusing on the gender coding of crime, gaslighting, and sexual shaming, producing a fresh feminist reading of this canonical novel.

INTRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF JUSTICE

Dorothy L. Sayers' 1930 novel *Strong Poison* contains some of crime fiction's most memorable, but also troubling, courtroom scenes. These powerful scenes present a detailed, forensic account of the discourses of justice and crime through their portrayal of the judge, the jurors, Harriet Vane, the accused, and Lord Peter Wimsey, the observer. This article investigates how *Strong Poison* uses these courtroom scenes to challenge the gendering of justice and to expose the deeply ingrained judgmental attitudes toward sexually active

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unmarried women in early twentieth-century British society. Analyzing courtroom scenes and related passages to examine Sayers' representation of justice and the subversion of justice, this article explores how crime fiction calls attention to the framing of women through gender-coded crimes and sexual shaming. The article examines Sayers' strategy of indirect feminist subversion through a methodology of textual analysis informed by feminism and crime fiction criticism, focusing on the novel's employment of specific themes and literary language that problematize justice and legal processes in crime fiction and challenge those patriarchal discourses employed to frame and shame women.

I argue that the framing of Vane, both in regard to poisoning and to sexuality, is driven by Victorian gender coding of specific crimes. The misogynistic phrase "a dreadful wicked woman" (Sayers 80) is used to describe Vane in referring to her alleged use of arsenic to poison her lover, Philip Boyes. This sententious expression is also applied to another woman in the novel: Mrs. Wrayburn, the great-aunt of Boyes and his murderer Norman Urquhart, is called "a wicked old woman" (Sayers 83).¹ Vane's incrimination and trial are impacted and shaped by those moralistic discourses about women, as are the perceptions of the judge, the jurors, and the public, reflecting the long shadow that the Victorian age and its tropes still cast into the twentieth century. In examining the shaming of Vane, Megan Hoffman correctly identifies her as a victim who is maligned and judged rather than as a deviant murderer (65). Sayers' novel demonstrates how the justice system is biased against women, and how their gender and sexuality are used against them to victimize them and shame them. *Strong Poison* examines how patriarchal power politics shape those portrayals of criminality, agency, and victimhood: patriarchy is literally toxic for women, as the novel's title illustrates.

This article contends that *Strong Poison's* contrasting courtroom scenes serve as a conceptual framework for the novel and bookend the text. These scenes are key to my argument as they investigate discourses of shaming and vilification of women through Vane. These parts of *Strong Poison* are key to my reading of what Christine Corcos calls "the relationship between law and justice" (505). Corcos goes on to explain how:

[in] courtroom dramas, authors and filmmakers express the tension between fairness and unfairness, justice and injustice, in ironic terms through sophisticated storytelling [. . .] to suggest to their audiences that the philosophical and practical relationships between justice as an end and the rule of law as its means require, not complacency, but continual and serious re-examination. (504–506)

Through its courtroom scenes that explicitly and directly invite the reader to question the justice system and its processes, *Strong Poison* articulates a powerful critique of the patriarchal bias that informs the elements of the system: the courts, the police, and their interpretation of events and clues.

In *Strong Poison*, life mirrors fiction for Vane, the Oxford-educated crime writer. Amateur detective Wimsey and Vane first meet and fall in love amidst the unlikely and suspense-filled scenario of Wimsey attempting to rescue Vane from the guilty verdict that will result in her execution. Vane stands accused of poisoning her lover, Boyes, with arsenic. The couple had been arguing over marriage because Boyes, having previously professed to believing in free love, broke with his principles and proposed to Vane. She turned his demeaning proposal down. After Boyes dined with his cousin, solicitor Norman Urquhart, and had coffee with Vane, he unexpectedly died. Vane had purchased arsenic to assess a plot for her novel, which showed she had arsenic in her possession. The trial results in a hung

jury thanks in part to Miss Climpson, a friend of Wimsey, who is a member of the jury. Wimsey has only a limited time before the retrial to discover the truth and save Vane from execution. Enlisting the help of Climpson and her female undercover investigators, “The Cattery,” Wimsey discovers that Urquhart acted fraudulently and embezzled money from Mrs. Wrayburn, that he then lost when the company he invested in crashed. Urquhart hoped to cover his losses with the money from Mrs. Wrayburn’s will, that he falsified to make out that he was her main heir, and murdered Boyes, who was the actual heir. Because Urquhart and Boyes shared the same meal on the night the fatal poisoning took place, Urquhart seemingly had an alibi. However, Wimsey realizes that Urquhart trained his body to tolerate arsenic so that he survived eating the poisoned meal whereas Boyes died. Wimsey presents these facts to Urquhart before the retrial, saving Vane from the gallows, but Vane and Wimsey’s relationship is left on a will-they-won’t-they cliffhanger at the end of the novel. In thus summarizing the storyline of *Strong Poison*, its key questions and narrative tensions become evident, as do the two main ways in which Vane is victimized: through gender coding crime and sexual shaming, both of which are intrinsically linked to her being an author and a woman.

GENDER-CODING CRIME IN THE COURTROOM SCENES

I argue that *Strong Poison* demonstrates that the gender coding of crime is the key reason why Vane is framed for Boyes’ murder. The novel focuses on the complexity of female identity, exposing the difficulty of perceiving Vane accurately outside of the gender-coded positions and roles that seek to define and restrict her. These female roles are constructed, within the crime genre generally but also specifically in terms of how Vane is positioned in the trial. In the novel’s opening, when the reader first encounters Vane, she is simply described as “the prisoner”—no name is given—which leads the reader to view her from the outside, like the jury or an observer might. The judge also refers to her throughout as “the prisoner,” which highlights the sense of objectification. On the book’s first page, the focus is on Vane’s eyes and the expression in them. When confronted with Judge Crossley’s stern frown during his summing up, Vane’s eyes function as a mirror of her thoughts, of her mind: “the prisoner looked at him. Her eyes . . . seemed equally without fear and without hope. They waited” (Sayers 1). In this passage, Vane’s victimization and lack of agency are evident, reflected in the words “they waited.” Throughout the novel, in the formal courtroom scenes, Vane is described as “the prisoner,” and during the first private meeting between Wimsey and Vane, the latter is still referred to as “the prisoner,” emphasizing the contrasting hierarchical and legal positions of the pair. In their meeting, however, Vane’s character emerges; she is extremely likable, demonstrating her quick wit and sensitivity, and, having had to make her own way in the world, she is independent and rightly takes pride in that fact. It is the text’s foregrounding of Wimsey’s response to Vane and her plight that shapes the reader’s understanding that she is innocent of the crime with which she is charged. Sayers’ narrative perspective thus powerfully spotlights the objectification and categorization of Vane. In the scene when the first verdict is announced and the judge orders a retrial because the jury could not deliver a unanimous decision, there is no depiction of Vane or her responses. However, at the novel’s end, she is explicitly described as “Harriet Vane, a free woman” (Sayers 209). These narrative shifts and the contrast they generate are extremely important, as

they formally and structurally foreground Vane's name and radically changed legal position as well as her reclaimed agency and subject position within the narrative.

Vane's charge and trial for Boyes' murder are substantially influenced by the fact that poisoning by arsenic has been a gender-coded crime since the Victorian age. The trope of the female poisoner dates back to the Victorian age, when poisoning murders were widespread and came to be specifically associated with women and deviance. Anne-Marie Kilday and David Nash explain that, during the Victorian era, murder by poisoning came to be associated primarily with women, due to the calculation, stealth, and cunning (rather than physical violence) which was required to commit murder in this manner. Consequently, the trope of the female poisoner is powerful and prevalent in popular culture (Kilday and Nash 102). Both Urquhart and the police would have been aware of this. *Strong Poison* investigates and exposes the patriarchal gender coding of specific crimes and the stereotyping of women, factors that almost cause Vane's execution and an appalling injustice. Defining gender coding, Olivia Guy-Evans describes it as "assigning specific traits or behaviors primarily or exclusively to certain genders. Gender codes are often presented by words and phrases associated with a particular gender . . . These words and phrases reflect a culture's ideas about gender and are often based on stereotypes" (n.p.). Guy-Evans concludes that "Gender influences how professionals view violence, with physical violence considered masculine and relational violence as feminine" (n.p.).

Vane is thus tried for murder, not because irrefutable evidence links her to Boyes' death but rather because arsenic poisoning is regarded as a gender-coded method of murder specific to women. The gender coding of poisoning reflected Victorian problematic constructions of gender and sexuality. As Anne Rodrick states, "Arsenic poisoning was coded as a female crime" (66). These factors directly affect the way that women poisoners are perceived who, as Kilday and Nash argue, "undermined gender norms by being criminally autonomous, enterprising, and scheming" (102). Kilday and Nash conclude that

Female poisoners were regarded as a blatant threat to society. By tending to kill male relatives and suitors, the actions of these women inverted extant patriarchal norms. Moreover, the secretive and clandestine nature of poisoning as a murderous methodology meant that their actions were regarded as wholly unpredictable. For these reasons . . . female poisoners instilled fear amongst Victorian society. (103)

The Victorian age and its beliefs and stereotypes continued to cast a long shadow well into the twentieth century (Beyer, "Dolls" 156), and it is precisely these stereotypes that the crime plot of Sayers' novel interrogates. *Strong Poison* shows the hold on the popular imagination which the trope of the female poisoner still had into the twentieth century, and the continued association of women with stealth and indirect aggression. In *Strong Poison*, Urquhart's domestic staff discuss the unnaturalness of women poisoners, commenting that, to use such methods, the perpetrator must be "a fiend in 'uman form'" (8). This phrase suggests that a woman committing murder by poisoning is deviant and highly unnatural, due to the stealth and calculation involved.

The gender coding of poisoning is furthermore reflected in the courtroom bias shown against Vane. In trials, both the judge and the jury can be instrumental in either perpetuating or challenging bias. Blake M. McKimmie and Barbara M. Masser comment on gender bias in courtroom evaluations, stating that "[w]omen may be evaluated negatively not because of some category contrast effect, but due to perceivers' more general gender related beliefs" (101). Referencing a study examining gender bias, McKimmie and Masser further

explain that those people which the study identified as reflecting a higher level of gender bias in their responses also demonstrated a more negative assessment of women (101).² Evaluating the role of the jury and gender stereotyping of accused offenders, McKimmie and Masser conclude that “gender not only has an influence on verdicts, but also affects what information gets considered during jury deliberations” (100). Awareness of gender bias in evaluation and judgment is thus pertinent, and *Strong Poison* demonstrates to us the deadly implications such bias can have in a justice system with the power to impose the death penalty.

Strong Poison’s court proceedings are therefore crucial to the investigation of gender and courtroom bias. The function of courtroom representations in crime fiction is complex, with scenes serving to produce moments of highly formalized and ritualized spectacle (Beyer #MeToo 33). In *Strong Poison*, these moments are embedded within the text as discursive markers that define, delineate, and judge femininity and sexuality in the context of crime and sexual transgression. The novel’s dramatic opening sequence focuses acutely on the final and most suspense-filled part of the court proceedings (apart from the verdict itself): the judge’s summing up. The devastating opening sentence, “There were crimson roses on the bench; they looked like splashes of blood” (Sayers 1), plays on the affective uneasiness and gothic foreboding that the splashes of blood evoke. The novel suggests the ambience of violence without making the reference explicit, thus alluding to the character assassination of Vane on which the prosecution case rests, bringing home the symbolic and fatal consequences of a guilty verdict.

Judge Crossley is described in detail in *Strong Poison*’s first two chapters, establishing his character as an embodiment of white male privilege and authority, thereby further underscoring the gender politics played out in the courtroom. His old age is emphasized in the description, both physically in the depictions of his face, hands, and voice, and symbolically in the allusion to him “outliving” the passing of time and even death itself (Sayers 1). Vane is depicted through a suggestive, femme fatale-like description of her eyes, “like dark smudges under the heavy square brows” (Sayers 1). The novel then goes on to describe the members of the jury seen from the judge’s perspective. The effect of this is to highlight the jury members’ normativity from the dominant perspective, as the book describes: “Three respectable tradesmen . . . a director of a large company . . . a publican . . . two youngish men of the artisan class; a nondescript, elderly man . . . an artist . . . three women—an elderly spinster, a stout capable woman who kept a sweet-shop, and a harassed wife and mother” (Sayers 1). Commenting on such normativity in representation, Corcos explains that courtroom dramas frequently rely on stereotypical characters (511), and indeed *Strong Poison* highlights the politics of representation through its depiction of the judge, jurors, and the accused.

In assessing Vane’s normativity, the jury and reader are asked to consider whether she looks like “that kind of woman” (Sayers 70) or not. Commenting on Judge Crossley’s description of Vane, Hoffman observes: “Even as the judge admonishes the jury not to take Harriet’s sexual deviance into account, he makes explicit that she is living ‘an immoral life,’ and he suggests the possibility that one moral lapse might lead to another” (66). Hoffman concludes that: “the judge insinuates that Harriet’s behaviour deviates from a standard of normality to which the majority of people conform” (66). The bias against Vane is further strengthened later, when Judge Crossley recommences his summing up. Here, the judge again suggests that Vane is vindictive and driven by hate for her former partner, as he repeats the delirious words the dying Boyes is reported to have said about her “‘Harriet’ll be rid of me now—I didn’t know she hated me quite so much’” (Sayers 15). The judge, then, is implicitly asking the jury to determine whether those words were true. The facts that Vane purchased the

poison while she and Boyes were together, that it had all been destroyed before Boyes died, and that she has no motive for killing him are all completely overshadowed by gender bias and specifically the gender coding of arsenic poisoning. The description on the first page of Vane's eyes being "without hope" suggests her resignation and acute awareness of the judgment that she will encounter from the jury. Her fears are seemingly confirmed as the novel reports a young couple in the public gallery discussing Vane's case during the jury deliberation. Describing Vane's face, the young woman calls her "hard" and castigates her lack of emotionality in court. The couple go on to consider the representation of murderers in wax-works (Sayers 24–25), reflecting the implicit impact of gendered stereotypes of criminals and their othering in popular cultural discourses and representations.

Vane's relationship with Boyes and her knowledge of arsenic as a crime writer are used to frame her as the murderer. Touching on the popular appeal of arsenic trials, due to their reputation and infamy in the public imagination, the novel explains how, in Vane's trial, one juror who refused to return a guilty verdict had previously watched a couple of arsenic trials (Sayers 31). The stereotyping of women as poisoners and the gender coding of this crime thus serve to incriminate Vane. In summing up the evidence against Vane, the judge highlights several occasions, in the months prior to Boyes' murder, of Vane purchasing a variety of deadly poisons, including arsenic, using a false name, and claiming that the poison was needed for vermin extermination. Evidently, this information weighs powerfully against Vane: the judge highlights Boyes' regular gastric problems coinciding with Vane's poison purchasing and is at pains to point out the morbid similarity between the poisoning plot of Vane's crime novel and the Boyes case (7).

Although Judge Crossley asserts that, "it is a great principle of English law that every accused person is held to be innocent unless and until he is proved otherwise" (Sayers 1), Vane has already been prejudged and found guilty due to gender bias and the gender coding of poisoning. The novel uses its narrative structure and organization to show how Vane is denied a voice and her perspective is not heard in court, as the reader never gets to see what she said under interrogation by the prosecutor or in her defense. This absence of Vane's voice in court is crucial to the portrayal of her victimization and erasure. Thus, commenting on *Strong Poison*, Hoffman says of Vane that she represents an "example of nonconforming women that complicates the meaning of transgression" (65). Her nonconformity, together with the gender coding of the crime of which she stands accused, are both formulaic toxic tropes of female criminality. *Strong Poison* exposes, interrogates, and ultimately rejects those toxic stereotypes and gender-coded crime.

GASLIGHTING AND SHAMING THE VICTIM

The novel uses two gender-coded stereotypes in crime fiction: the female victim/villain and the toxic male, represented by Vane and Urquhart respectively. The novel's court scenes reveal sexual shaming to be key to Vane's gaslighting. The court scenes reveal the hypocrisy and double standards surrounding unmarried women's sexuality and sexual activity in the early- to mid-twentieth century (Hoffman 83). These double standards lead to the shaming of Vane's sexuality and highlight the role of gender bias in judging her and her life decisions. Leigh Gilmore examines the "tainting" of women with dishonesty and "doubt" that takes place both "in courts of law and courts of public opinion" (23). This tainting also affects Vane

and is exacerbated by the scrutiny of her sexuality. *Strong Poison* shows how, despite the lack of indisputable evidence to convict Vane, gender bias is central, both to shaming her as the victim and framing her for the murder.

Crime fiction frequently makes the scrutiny of female sexuality and sexual shaming a part of the plot and character portrayals. Vane's sexual relationship with Boyes and their cohabitation further compound the gender coded bias against her. Like the poisoning crime itself, the bias regarding Vane's gender and sexuality is rooted in the Victorian age and its idealized constructions of femininity as submissive, selfless, and focused on male fulfillment. These ideas were inscribed in Victorian popular cultural discourses, such as Coventry Patmore's poem, "The Angel in the House," gender constructions that reverberated long into the twentieth century, according to Annie Cossins (64). Those women who failed to, or refused to, submit to those damaging gender discourses, such as Vane in her career as an author, continued to be judged harshly when compared to those stereotypes. As Suzanne Bray states of *Strong Poison*, in this novel, "the author wished to illustrate, very discreetly, other possible lifestyles for women than those generally approved of in the society she lived in" (22). These are precisely the aspects of Vane that Judge Crossley condemns in his less than objective summing-up assessment of her as liable to commit "crimes of violence" due to having "inadequate moral standards" and being "of unbalanced mind" (Sayers 21). This condemnation of Vane, the misrepresented victim, reflects Amy B. Hagenrater-Gooding's assessment of trials and their representation through the lens of #MeToo. Hagenrater-Gooding points out that trials frequently interrogate the female victim and their lifestyle, rather than "yield justice and ultimately punish the criminal" (312). Comparing *Strong Poison*'s 1930s setting to the present day, sexual shaming was and continues to be a widely used misogynist strategy for degrading women and girls (Monet). Contemporary feminist debates around sexual shaming are thus useful in assessing the treatment of Vane in court and by the media, as described in the novel (Beyer, #MeToo 62).

The analysis of gaslighting as a practice and its effects on victims is instrumental to *Strong Poison*. The novel demonstrates the devastating effects on Vane, who is gaslighted into passivity and helplessly accepting her punishment for a crime she did not commit. The term originates from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play *Gaslight*, a marriage thriller depicting a husband's subjugation of his wife. Brian Duignan further defines the term and its application as

an elaborate and insidious technique of deception and psychological manipulation, usually practiced by a single deceiver, or "gaslighter," on a single victim over an extended period. Its effect is to gradually undermine the victim's confidence in his own ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong, or reality from appearance, thereby rendering him pathologically dependent on the gaslighter in his thinking or feelings. (n.p.)³

Vane's character demonstrates the psychological and mental effects of gaslighting by Boyes, by Urquhart, and by the legal system that incriminates her. One reason why Vane falls victim to Urquhart's plot is his successful gaslighting of her and of the police. This gaslighting is indirect, rather than direct; implicit rather than explicit, which is why, just like his poisoning murder, his gaslighting is successful in framing Vane for the murder that he committed. Urquhart, then, exploits the cultural stereotype of the female poisoner to the full to conceal his crimes. Vane is a crime writer and thus is familiar with the crime genre: its formulaic characters, tropes, and plot twists. However, when accused of murder, she is unable to apply this knowledge to her own life, and this inability or blind spot is the effect

of gaslighting and the doubting of her own perceptions and reality that gaslighting causes. Vane is unable to solve the crime in her own life; it is as if she suffers from a kind of amnesia. Sayers thus makes visible the effects of patriarchy on the legal system.

Strong Poison's portrayal of Vane shows her as very guarded and suffering from low self-esteem. These are both manifestations of gaslighting and the trauma that Vane has suffered due to being pilloried by the court and the media through their misogynistic portrayal of her relationship with Boyes. As Elizabeth Trembley states, "This novel introduces us to the trauma she went through with Boyes, and to the second, if not more terrific, trauma of the trial and public exposure of her affair" (87). The novel shows how Boyes gaslighted Vane in his relationship with her, suggesting that she should be grateful for his offer of marriage, after they had been living together outside of wedlock. However, having proudly declared his belief in free love and disinclination to marry, his sudden change of heart is a blatant attempt to manipulate Vane. His gaslighting of her is illustrated in his delirious accusation against her later while dying. Trembley explains, commenting on Vane and Boyes' relationship and how Boyes wields power over Vane and attempt to call the shots and manipulate her: "Although the patriarchy views the relationship as unorthodox, the affair's structure mimics the typical marital relationship, with the female effacing herself to please the male partner" (88). *Strong Poison* thus exposes the power imbalance within heterosexual relationships, enabling men to manipulate and gaslight women through, first, the myth of free love, then the promise to restore their respectability through normative heterosexual marriage. *Strong Poison* provides a realistic representation of the psychological and mental effect of sexual shaming and the trauma caused by being charged with murder and potential death penalty, with Vane being sexually shamed for having consensually entered a sexual cohabitation relationship with Boyes (Hoffman 66). Jessica Ringrose and Kaitlin Regehr further highlight the social "ostracization" that is a consequence of sexual shaming and victim blaming: experiences that are also reflected in Vane's social isolation (22). As Ulrike Schultz explains, this shaming is extended into the courtroom and its processes. She argues that "[f]emale offenders experienced criminal proceedings as an investigation not merely into their legal conduct but also into their compliance with expectations regarding their role as women" (104).

Urquhart exploits his position to implicitly gaslight both the police and the jury, successfully incriminating Vane through the Victorian association of women with arsenic murders. Urquhart comes across as a highly toxic and creepy character who uses his professional position and his class and gender privilege to embezzle, gaslight, and murder. However, he raises red flags in both the women from "The Cattery" and Wimsey. Using Wimsey as focalizer, Urquhart is described as having "neat dress, thick, smooth dark hair and general appearance of brisk and business-like respectability" (Sayers 92). However, on that occasion Wimsey also notes Urquhart's curiously pallid skin that features odd freckle-like spots and his "dark and shrewd" eyes (Sayers 92). In an earlier conversation, when discussing Urquhart with women from "The Cattery," Wimsey is told that one of them, Sylvia, suspects Urquhart of being the murderer due to her dislike of his hair. She asserts, "he's too sleek to be true" (Sayers 76), using Urquhart's appearance against him to pass judgment. In identifying Urquhart as the culprit early in the novel, Sylvia and the women in "The Cattery" are shown to possess an incisive understanding of patriarchy and how individual men exploit their position within it to gain power and commit crimes. Urquhart's hair is thus used consistently in the novel to allude to his smug arrogance and too-slick appearance and manner. However, his hair is literally toxic, as it gives him away when forensic examinations reveal traces of arsenic in his hair and nails. Urquhart's toxic masculinity is evident in his encounters with

Wimsey throughout the novel but is finally exposed and undone in their brilliant final scene in which Wimsey reveals him as Boyes' murderer (200–06).

Strong Poison uses the metaphor of deadly toxin to expose Urquhart's insidious use of power to dominate women as well as other men he considers to be weaker, like Boyes. However, *Strong Poison* shows how Urquhart's toxic masculinity and violence are obscured due to gender and class bias. Judge Crossley's prejudiced commentary demonstrates how Urquhart's social class affects the description of him in a court of law and subsequent perceptions of him: "Mr. Urquhart retains the dignified old-fashioned custom of having the maid in attendance throughout the meal" (Sayers 10). By referring to Urquhart's habits and manners as "old-fashioned" and "dignified," in contrast to Vane's modern ways and lifestyle, the judge places this gender- and class-biased account in the jurors' minds, obscuring Urquhart's crime and almost producing a guilty verdict for Vane, the victim and witness. Such is the insidious power and effect of gaslighting that Vane appears to have been mentally and psychologically unmoored from her professional knowledge of crime plots and her awareness of psychology. She is manipulated into resignation and disregarding the reality of her own experience and knowledge through gaslighting. This is what makes Urquhart such an effective villain: by using stealth and cunning, he is able to contaminate the processes of justice just like he was able to poison Boyes' body. Ultimately, however, Urquhart ends up poisoning himself, producing the toxic evidence he never intended as he literally embodies the physical evidence for the murder he committed, his own body turning against him as it yields up its secrets. Despite his wicked scheming, the vampiric Urquhart is finally brought to justice, and the wronged Vane is cleared of all charges.

However, it would be a mistake to think that the portrayal of patriarchal power and authority in *Strong Poison* is confined to either Judge Crossley, individual male jury members, or Urquhart. Rather, the novel shows how Vane is gaslit and manipulated into doubting herself and what she knows, by the legal system, the police, and the court. *Strong Poison*, then, demonstrates how patriarchal power resides in the system, the establishment, which is why as a single woman on her own, Vane is so vulnerable. However, the novel also shows that resistance to patriarchal victimization can be mobilized through a network of women—namely, "The Cattery." Two older "anti-conformist women" on the jury (Hoffman 65) refuse to convict her—one of them, Miss Climpson, and the other, a woman of independent financial means, who object to attempts by the jury foreman and another juror to bully them into returning a guilty verdict. As Hoffman says of the novel's feminist plot twist featuring those two women on the jury, they "are supportive and united against unfair judgements by a patriarchal culture" (65). Enabled by the solidarity of other women, resistance to dominant victim-blaming discourses secures a retrial for Vane and prevents a gross injustice.

CONCLUSION: RESISTING THE TOXICITY OF PATRIARCHY

Strong Poison shows how brutally toxic patriarchal justice is for women. The novel's poisoning plot revolves around the gender coding of crime and the definition and categorization of women believed to be criminal as sexually transgressive and socially subversive. *Strong Poison* problematizes injustices, such as the one that nearly befalls Vane due to gender bias and prejudice based on stereotyping of women. In its urgent critique of the prejudicial treatment of women at the hands of the patriarchal justice system, *Strong Poison* exposes

those Victorian stereotypes regarding gender and crime that lingered long into the twentieth century. The novel also foreshadows important current #MeToo debates about the erasure of women's experience in the justice system (Beyer, *#MeToo* 77) and the subversion of justice shown in high-profile legal cases (Nelson; Boyle). We thus see a parallel between contemporary feminist critiques of women's treatment in courts and *Strong Poison's* exposure of misogyny.

Strong Poison's closure provides Vane with temporary breathing space in a society that—as the arsenic murder itself illustrates—is toxic and that denounces nonconformist women as “dreadful” and “wicked.” At Vane's retrial described at the novel's end, the ominous red roses from the first trial have been replaced with bright yellow chrysanthemums. The color and flower choice are highly symbolic and signal fresh hope and optimism—the hope Vane did not have at the beginning of the novel—as all charges against her are dropped, and she walks away from court a free woman. By challenging the prescribed gender coding of arsenic poisoning and the stereotype of the creative, sexually active woman as transgressive, *Strong Poison* continues to present a powerful and highly timely example for the #MeToo era. Sayers' canonical novel interrogates precisely those crime fiction conventions that victimize women, thereby exposing the patriarchal misogyny that drives the perpetuation of formulaic female stereotypes in popular culture through its depictions of a toxic justice system that gaslights and silences women.

Keywords: sexual shaming; gaslighting; gender coding; justice; Sayers, Dorothy L.; *Strong Poison*

NOTES

1. Thank you to Elizabeth Foxwell for pointing out this parallel.
2. McKimmie and Masser are referencing D. Abrams, G.T. Viki, B. Masser, and G. Bohner “Perceptions of Stranger and Acquaintance Rape: The Role of Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in Victim Blame and Rape Proclivity,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 84, no. 1, 2003, pp. 111–25.
3. See also Deborah Philips' examination of the theme of gaslighting in crime fiction; Beyer, *#MeToo*.

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