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Realism and Relevancy: Portrayals of the Theatre in Ngaio Marsh's *Enter a Murderer* (1935) and *Light Thickens* (1982)

ABSTRACT

*Dame Edith Ngaio Marsh is recognized as one of the original Queens of Crime; her works sit alongside the greats of the crime fiction genre's Golden Age including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. Marsh is just as well known in her homeland of New Zealand for her significant contributions to the world of theatre. This article explores the impact of a collision of Marsh's two worlds – the world of the murder mystery and that of the performing arts – in her series of Roderick Alleyn novels. With particular focus on her first novel set in a theatre, *Enter a Murderer* (1935), and the last novel penned by Marsh, also set in a theatre, *Light Thickens* (1982), this article will look at how realistic Marsh's portrayal of the performing arts is as well as the relevancy of such details in building a plot for a crime fiction novel.*

KEYWORDS

Roderick
Alleyn
crime fiction
Ngaio Marsh
theatre
writing

INTRODUCTION

Dame Edith Ngaio Marsh was an artist, actor, director, designer,¹ educator, essayist, playwright, producer and crime fiction novelist. Born in Christchurch, New Zealand around 1895 (her father failed to register her birth on time and so the date is subject to some speculation), Marsh engaged in various aspects of the creative industries up until her death in 1982. Marsh was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in 1948 (Harding 1979:33) and a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1966 for distinguished services to the arts, especially writing and theatre production (Her Majesty's

Stationery Office 1966: 6572). Recognition for her writing also came in the form of an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers Association of America in 1978.² The University of Canterbury similarly recognized the duality of Marsh's life by awarding her their first Honorary Doctorate of Literature in 1962 and naming their theatre in recognition of her contribution both to the University's drama society and to the city of Christchurch firstly as an actor and then as a director. This article explores the impact of a collision of Marsh's two dominant worlds – the murder mystery genre and the performing arts – in her series of Roderick Alleyn novels.

MARSH'S WRITING

Ngaio Marsh is recognized as one of the original Queens of Crime alongside other greats including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. Together, these four women – of which Marsh was the only one not to have been born in England – worked to define that period of crime writing between World Wars I and II often referred to as the genre's Golden Age (Knight 2006: 77).

Between 1934 (*A Man Lay Dead*) and 1982 (*Light Thickens*)³, Marsh penned 32 detective novels featuring her sleuth Roderick Alleyn of Scotland Yard's Criminal Investigation Department. These novels span the lives of both Marsh and her gentleman detective whose personality was one of 'comparative normality' (Marsh 2009a: 5), however the term 'comparative' is perhaps subjective. Alleyn attended Eton and has the elegance and fastidiousness of a public school education followed by studies at Oxford.⁴ The brother of a diplomat, he is described as being tall and thin – 'an attractive, civilised man whom it would be pleasant to talk with' (Marsh 2009a: 5). Alleyn is said 'to know Shakespearean scholarship' better than many professionals in the business (Weinkauff 1996: 17). He is attracted to actresses in both *Enter a Murderer* (1935) and *Vintage Murder* (1937), yet it is not until *Artists in Crime* (1938) that Alleyn meets Agatha Troy whom he later marries.

Marsh's life collides with her characters in a number of ways. Alleyn's name pays homage to the Elizabethan actor Edward Alleyn (1566-1626) who founded Dulwich College where her own father had studied (Marsh 2009a: 8). Alleyn would also be about the same age as Marsh, while Alleyn's wife Troy is an accomplished painter like her creator. Perhaps the biggest collision of fact and fiction is the way that Marsh draws on her experiences as both consumer and creator of all manner of theatrical productions to form the settings and plots for many of her works as an author. The two novels discussed in this article reflect Marsh's love

of William Shakespeare. The title of her first novel *Enter a Murderer* is a stage direction for productions of *Macbeth* that is then central to the plot of her final novel, *Light Thickens* (the title of which is one of Macbeth's lines).

Not one to easily be categorized in genre terms, Marsh wrote more than just crime fiction - 'she also wrote other forms of prose including short stories, articles and travel journalism, books on drama, plays, poems and nonfiction' (McKellar 2012: 40) along with her autobiography *Black Beech and Honeydew* (Marsh 1965) which was updated in 1981. Marsh's writing improved over her fifty year career in several ways. Firstly, *Light Thickens* is of a higher quality than her earlier works: the writing is more polished, the plotting tighter and the characterizations more fully realized. Another difference can be found in the way that the direction of a production of *The Scottish Play* dominates the narrative as opposed to Marsh's previous utilization of the world of theatre to support a crime fiction story (Drayton 1998: 292). Yet the overall plots of *Enter a Murderer* and *Light Thickens* remain unchanged from her other 30 detective novels: a murder is committed and Roderick Alleyn solves the case.

MARSH AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

In some circles, particularly those in her homeland of New Zealand, Marsh is better known for her contributions to the performing arts than she is for her contributions to the crime fiction canon. Marsh's literary journey began as an early consumer of all manner of texts. She read adaptations of the Greek myths and Rudyard Kipling before falling in love with Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, all apparently before she was ten (Harding 1979: 18). She was also introduced to the one of the world's most famous detectives, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Marsh was about ten when she first wrote and performed in the same play, *Cinderella* (Harding 1979: 19). It was also around this time she made her acting debut in *Isolene* (Harding 1979: 19).

Later in high school at St Margaret's College, Marsh wrote *The Moon Princess* based on a fairy tale by George Macdonald (Harding 1979: 19 and Drayton 1988: 51). In 1919, Marsh started writing short stories at the same time as the Allan Wilkie Company was touring and this inspired another play, *The Medallion* (Harding 1979: 24). It was this script that secured her a job as an actress within the Company. Many more plays followed, and in 1923 she commenced producing theatre with 'a large organization called Charities Unlimited' (Harding 1979: 25).

By 1927, Marsh was teaching at a drama school in Christchurch that she had co-founded. Between returning to her painting and then travelling to England in 1928, Marsh ‘was elected a member of the English Society of Authors and in 1930 she began to have some of her syndicated travel articles published by the Associated Press in New Zealand’ (Harding 1979: 29). The foundation for her crime fiction writing was now laid - colourful characters carefully observed on her travels and the composition of settings captured by a painter’s eye would serve her well as she utilized her skills as both novelist and director.

In the late 1930s, Marsh began a more active life, splitting her time between writing and the theatre. Through her income from writing she was able to work with local amateur theatrical societies throughout New Zealand, firstly in Dunedin and Christchurch and then in Wellington. In 1941, when invited to direct a production for the Canterbury University Drama Society, Marsh agreed on the condition that the production was *Hamlet*. This season (in modern dress) would be the spark that revived Shakespearean productions in New Zealand, a body of work that had previously been considered ‘box office poison’ (Harding 1979: 32). Though it had been over twenty years since the last production of *Hamlet*, the reviews were positive, the city was abuzz, the season sold out and a tour was organized. Joanne Drayton observed that all ‘the detective books she had written had never brought this kind of local acclaim’ (1988: 142). In addition to lecturing, Marsh continued directing at the University for over twenty years and her success within New Zealand as a director spanned the breadth of the nation.

THE NOVELS

Marsh’s knowledge of and love for the theatre informed many of her crime novels including her second novel, *Enter a Murderer* (1935) and the posthumously published *Light Thickens* (1982). In *Enter a Murderer*, Roderick Alleyn is enjoying a night at the fictional Unicorn Theatre with his friend Nigel Bathgate, watching a performance of *The Rat and Beaver*. The production is in a second week of full houses and the onstage tension between the players is an extension of the drama playing out offstage, ‘intensified and bigger than life, like emotion in a nightmare’ (Marsh 1938: 19). The audience members are on the edge of their seats as the Beaver corners the Rat, when Jennifer enters with her own gun and the tables are turned – ‘[Y]ou don’t have any luck, do you, Beaver?’ (Marsh 1938: 23) – and with a deafening ‘bang’, the Beaver crumples to the floor and Alleyn knows his case has just opened before the shocked usher finds him in the darkened auditorium. The acting-out of murder has

become a homicide with a very real victim.

The Unicorn Theatre is the venue for more than one homicide during this production, with a second murder occurring before the investigation into Beaver's death is complete. The second victim is the properties master (Props) who appears to have hanged himself, having been the one who loaded the gun in the 'accident' not with the intended blanks but with live ammunition. Alleyn, sensing too much acting and not enough sincerity, sets a trap to reveal the true perpetrator, who despite maintaining his character acting still gives himself away to the men assembled on stage. The arrest is made and a neat ending restores order to the theatre.

The second novel discussed here, *Light Thickens*, is described as a 'double bill: [Marsh's] thoughts as a distinguished theatrical producer [...] and detection of a very high order as befits the empress of crime' (Marsh 1982). Peregrine Jay is directing a production of *Macbeth* at the Dolphin Theatre. All is progressing smoothly towards opening night – 23 April⁵ – but can the production survive the curse of The Scottish Play? Jay does not believe in superstition, but the cast is not reassured. Equipment is moved, pranks are played, injuries happen, and expectation hangs thick in the air.

Opening night passes without incident and the critics and press announce a flawless production but, after a month of full houses, a murder occurs during a performance. Once again, Alleyn is in the stalls. The entire company had means, opportunity and motive yet the perpetrator eludes him. Eventually the pieces fall into place and the police find a suspect packing his bags and settling his affairs. Another is consistently seeking the return of his claidheamh-mor,⁶ the murder weapon. All becomes clear, the link between the two suspects is established – one the perpetrator, the other a witness to two murders – and, armed with a warrant, Alleyn sets off with his colleague and some uniformed officers to make the arrest.

THE STAGE AND THE PAGE

Harding writes that there are 'dramatic parallels' between the stage and page, starting with the:

elaboration of plot after the introduction of the dramatis personae [...] incidental characters may populate the action for added variety [followed by] the clash of personalities and hidden tensions [which] find an outlet in the dramatic climax of murder [...] Additional drama ensues as the investigation proceeds [and finally] there follows a standard resolution and denouement. (Harding 1979: 277)

Marsh is a master of this approach. In both books, the theatre is more than an exotic locale in

which murder happens in corners, hidden from the audience's prying eyes, or in the labyrinth of corridors and dressing rooms, backdrops, scenery and props, where things are designed to not always appear as they seem. Marsh's deep affection for drama allows the theatre to act as a springboard for examining murder itself. Even the titles and chapter headings of these books reinforce the connection to the theatre as an artistic endeavour (such as 'Dress Rehearsal' and 'Finis' in *Light Thickens*) rather than just the environs of the stage as a setting. Drayton notes that for Marsh, the theatre is 'not just a venue for crime, [it is] the book's defining energy, creating a cohesive, vivid piece of writing' (1988: 56).

The opening pages of *Enter a Murderer* focus on a discussion of stage names, these popular pseudonyms of performers being a very personal choice. Usually an actor will take on a more memorable, or an easier-to-spell, name than their own or for membership in an actors' union such as the Screen Actors Guild or Actors' Equity. These societies require that no two working actors have the same name: 'only one saint in the profession' (Marsh 1938: 1). Minor characters in these works are not given names, just positions; Props, Stage Door Keeper and the Dressers for instance. This theatricality is both reinforced and expanded upon in *Light Thickens* with a full list of characters appearing within the novel printed before Chapter One. This list includes those involved in the production of *Macbeth* and the investigators of Scotland Yard. The adjacent page mimics a programme, commencing with the theatre, production, and author before detailing the casting, creatives, and setting for the production (Marsh 1982).

The 'indescribable flavour of the working half of a theatre when the nightly show is coming on' (Marsh 1938: 10) is well articulated by Marsh. In *Enter a Murderer*, she uses the traditional backstage calls of the stage manager to mark time,⁷ maintain the quick pace of the action and add to the authenticity of her writing. In addition to evoking the aural hubbub that is taking place around the narrative in preparation for a performance on both sides of the curtain that divides the house, Marsh writes of the specific odours backstage; the smell of 'dead scene paint, of fresh grease paint, of glue-size and of dusty darkness' (Marsh 1938: 10). These descriptions help reinforce the confined nature of the stage and the proximity of the dressing rooms to the stage and the stage to the audience.

The rehearsals for a production are often shrouded in mystery and have been described as: 'making a public display of what is most private and intimate about being human' (Perry 2001: 27). Marsh provides a glimpse into these processes in *Light Thickens*. The opening chapter details the first week of rehearsals, commencing with the designer

presenting the concept sketches and costuming for the production. The cast then join the action and Jay starts by sharing ‘the world of the play’ with the company; that is, his vision for the production. This is a fairly typical start to a rehearsal period (Copely and Killner 2001, Pallin 2000).

Marsh also touches on the characterization processes the actors go through: ‘They fell into a discussion of whether he should, in fact, use the dialect, and decided against it as it would entail all the other lairds doing so too’ (Marsh 1982: 31). Fight choreography is artistically designed to give the illusion of ‘spontaneous, violent and aggressive competition’ (Schneider 1997: 145) and Marsh shares her experience as a director through a discussion between Gaston and Jay about the safety of the fight and its notation.⁸ For the reader, this is a clever insight that will later reveal a killer while appearing as another part of the theatrical narrative to the characters.

THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

The utilization of a variety of theatrical conventions and superstitions within these (and many more of Marsh’s works) serve to drive the crime fiction plots forward. The setting for a novel can be a difficult element for a writer to command – some genres (such as fantasy, gothic and science-fiction) require the elevation of setting so that the world the characters inhabit becomes a character in its own right. In crime fiction, the setting is important, but there are examples where the setting has become clichéd (such as the country house or dark alley) and must be handled carefully to ensure the setting supports rather than detracts from the narrative.

A sub-plot in *Light Thickens* is the curse of what is called ‘The Scottish Play’. It is generally considered bad luck to name the play *Macbeth* or its central protagonist. Lina Perkins Wilder notes a lack of ‘evidence that the play was considered unlucky in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries’ (2010: 393), yet by the twentieth century it had become theatrical lore. This continues today with Robert Faires citing no less than a dozen modern productions encountering strife (2000). More recently, the Australian-based Bell Shakespeare Company cancelled a number of performances in 2012 as severe food poisoning affected several lead players and in a production in Manchester, England, a cast member was hospitalized from injuries sustained in a fight scene. The legend of the curse appears to originate from an unsubstantiated story surrounding the first performance of the play in 1606 when the actor playing Lady Macbeth became feverish and subsequently died (Egan 2002:

236).

Marsh has cleverly woven this into the production in *Light Thickens*. Her characters are divided between those who believe in the curse and those who do not. Nina Gaythorn believes in it: ‘Without even waiting to take off her gloves she scuffled in her handbag, produced a crucifix which she kissed, and laid on the table a clove of garlic and her prayer book’ (Marsh 1982: 25), while Peregrine Jay states, ‘[S]uperstitions – most, I think...are silly little matters of habit’ (Marsh 1982: 22). The curse is used as a device to build expectation in the readers and characters alike that there will be a disaster based upon the ‘superstitious theories that have grown up round this play’ (Marsh 1982: 105).

Readers who are familiar with crime fiction’s generic conventions expect a neat package of one (or more) murders and then the capture of a perpetrator. The characters are familiar with the play and expect something to go wrong. Marsh skilfully grants both wishes. There are numerous pranks, a lightning strike nearby to further frighten the company and then the murder of a leading player, meeting the expectations of both the readers and characters.

The two novels also chart the technical development of theatre over almost fifty years between them. In *Enter a Murderer*, Alleyn, standing in the prompt corner, looks up ‘and [sees] dimly the electricians’ platform, on which one man [stands] with his hand on the switchboard’ (Marsh 1938: 11). By *Light Thickens*, the lighting designer is presenting sketches (Marsh 1982: 13), plotting special effects such as thunder and fog from dry ice (Marsh 1982: 120), and then replaying the cues on a computerized controller (Marsh 1982: 14) rather than directly altering the dimming resistance. This development is reinforced through the staging described within the two novels. The open stage with automation to articulate multiple levels for *Macbeth* in *Light Thickens* is contrasted by the simpler and perhaps more realistic box set of *The Rat and Beaver* in *Enter a Murderer*.

CONCLUSION

Every crime novel needs a setting; a place for the murder to be committed and subsequently solved. Readers can be unforgiving when essential details of the setting do not support the storyline. Thus, many writers write of what they know, of worlds with which they are familiar. Marsh wrote of a place she knew intimately. The theatre surrounded the girl that would grow to be one of the most famous crime novelists of the Golden Age, firstly as a writer and actress in her childhood, then, in her twenties, when she started writing of murders

set in the theatre; finally, when in her later years she directed plays and immersed herself in the cultural life of Christchurch, building up a strong tradition of quality productions in a provincial city. Using this knowledge of the way theatres and productions work, Marsh wrote memorable crime fiction from a theatrical base. The two worlds of Dame Edith Ngaio Marsh frequently collided in new and unexpected ways, resulting in a remarkable career in two separate but surprisingly compatible artistic fields for which she was equally rewarded, acknowledged and revered.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In 1929 Marsh and Nelly Rhodes operated a small shop in Knightsbridge called 'Touch and Go' selling handmade decorative homewares (Drayton 1988: 38).

² The Grand Master Award is named after the ‘father’ of modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe

³ Published posthumously.

⁴ Unlike ‘public’ or state schools in Australia and New Zealand, public schools in England are exclusive fee-paying independent institutions.

⁵ The birth date of Marsh and death date of Shakespeare. It is also allegedly Shakespeare’s birthday as his father was tardy in entering the information in the parish registry.

⁶ A Gaelic term often Anglicized as ‘claymore’ or ‘double-bladed sword’.

⁷ These calls are generally the ‘Half’ given at 35 minutes before curtain up, ‘Fifteen minutes’, and ‘Beginners’ at which point actors in the opening scenes will make their way to the stage in preparation for the performance to commence (Maccoy 2004: 172, 176-177).

⁸ In the theatre, ‘notation’ refers to the recording of choreography for a fight or similar scene.