Dame Ngaio Marsh shortly after receiving her Grandmaster Award, 1978.

(Photo: Suzanne Richards.)
THE JANUS PROBLEM:

A SEARCH FOR PATTERNS IN THE LIFE
AND FICTION OF DAME NGAIO MARSH.

A THESIS

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TO MY PARENTS
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ABSTRACT

This thesis, as its title implies, seeks to understand the life and work of Ngaio Marsh, particularly as this concerns her writing.

Chapter One deals briefly with the relevant biographical material, much of which is new.

Chapter Two constitutes a literary defence of the study of detective fiction with acknowledged artistic merit.

Chapter Three involves an analysis of Marsh's craftsmanship, her qualities of style and characterization and a discussion of her principal series characters.

Chapter Four touches on the distinctive features of Dame Ngaio's New Zealand stories and English rural settings, finding points in common for both.

Chapter Five considers the general influence of Ngaio Marsh's theatrical experience upon her writing.

In the Conclusion a general summation of Marsh's career is presented.
INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Readers of this thesis should be informed of the reasons for an adaptation of standard scholarly procedure regarding references.

Chronological footnoting, especially in Chapter One, is used with a specific modification. For example, on page 14 of this thesis the sequence of references (numbers 15, 16 and 17) is interrupted by footnote 8. Besides reference 8 (a lengthy television interview with Ngaio Marsh), references 4 and 20 (to two valuable biographical interviews with Marsh) and reference 45 (a 1954 radio interview) appear out of sequence from time to time, to prevent further overloading of already burgeoning footnotes. If academic convention had not been modified, separate footnotes would have added more than thirty references to the list. In short, a new number was only given to a totally new reference in this thesis.

The other reason for adopting this procedure is that it can aid the reader to distinguish more readily between reminiscences which Marsh made in 1954 (ref.45), 1966 (ref.8) or 1979-80 (refs.4 and 20) and to clarify at a glance which of these sources is being used at any given point in the account.

Attention should also be drawn to what may appear as anomalies regarding the format of chapter references to Marsh's novels.
For example, it is not immediately clear why on page 138 reference to one novel ("Artists in Crime, XIV:120") differs in form from a reference to another ("Singing in the Shrouds, Seven, III:153"). The reason lies in Marsh's texts themselves. From her first novel, up to and including Death in a White Tie (1938), Ngaio Marsh wrote an average of between twenty and twenty-five chapters per novel, each chapter listed in Roman numerals. Starting with Overture to Death (1939), Marsh began to divide chapters themselves into sections. This practice meant that she titled the chapter numbers in English and deployed Roman numerals for the small narrative sections within each of them. This allowed Marsh a steady diminution in the number of chapters in a given novel, to an average of about fifteen in the 1950's and down to an average of ten chapters in the novels of the 1960's and 1970's. Therefore on page 152, for example, Vintage Murder can only be referenced in terms of "VM, V:48" (i.e., Chapter Five, page 48 in the Fontana paperback edition), whereas Died in the Wool (1945), coming after Marsh's 1939 change of layout, is referred to as "DIW, I, II:30" (or Chapter One, Section one, page 30 in Fontana). On the same page The Nursing Home Murder (1935) and Enter a Murderer (1935) are referenced as was Vintage Murder (1937), for all these novels obviously preceded the change of novelistic structure in 1939.

Finally, it is assumed that readers will notice the manner by which page references may follow on under the initial heading up of a particular novel. Thus, on page 158 of the thesis the author moves from discussion of a point in Final Curtain to
iderations raised in False Scent. Therefore a quotation one section of Final Curtain ("FC 12, II:177") is rred to again with only a page reference ("178") as it comes from the same twelfth chapter and its second section.

point, then, is that the Marsh texts themselves dictated rtical practice in this matter.

(Bruce Harding)
INTRODUCTION

AND

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.
He turned to Lady Lacklander. "I know you'll understand that in a case like this we have to fuss about and try to get as complete a picture as possible of the days, sometimes even the weeks and months, before the event. It generally turns out that ninety-nine per cent of the information is quite useless and then everybody thinks how needlessly inquisitive and impertinent the police are. Sometimes, however, there is an apparently irrelevant detail that leads, perhaps by accident, to the truth."

Lady Lacklander stared at him like a basilisk. She had a habit of blinking slowly, her rather white eyelids dropping conspicuously like shutters: a slightly reptilian habit that was disconcerting. She blinked twice in this manner at Alleyn, and said: "What are you getting at, my dear Roderick? I hope you won't finesse too elaborately. Pray, tell us what you want."

-- Ngaio Marsh

_Scales of Justice_ (Eight, 3:184).
In the forthcoming thesis it is my intention to consider several significant events in Dame Ngaio Marsh's life, especially as these relate to her career as a writer.

I propose to trace several of the dominant literary influences which have helped forge her own distinctive style of writing, and shall attempt to assess the whole range of her fiction in terms of a study of significant themes, sharpening the focus (where appropriate) on specific novels in her remarkably consistent oeuvre.

My over-riding consideration in this thesis is to address the problem of why this singular New Zealander has so consistently managed to maintain her writing at the forefront of a very competitive and specifically English literary form. Why, simply speaking, have Dame Ngaio's novels attained such international currency, and why is her name so often linked with those of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham — all native English practitioners in the genre? Why are Marsh's novels so well regarded on both sides of the Atlantic (to say nothing of the metaphorical "spaces" in between)?

The thesis is titled "The Janus Problem" not as an inane attempt at classicizing but for two reasons. Firstly, Janus was the Roman god of doors — of entrances and exits — which seems appropriate to an individual so intensely concerned with theatre. Secondly, Janus, who is traditionally portrayed with two heads facing in opposite directions, is regarded as a "symbol of wholeness — of the desire to master all things. Because of its duality, it may be taken to signify all pairs of opposites."¹ This well typifies Ngaio Marsh's own struggles with painting, theatre and writing and also expresses my own double focus: always moving between writing of her life and fiction, in treating her New Zealand and English loyalties and in remaining mindful of Marsh's double-minded alternation between writing detective novels and producing plays. These two sets of
organizing polarities (New Zealand-England and Writing-Production) have dictated the logic of the chapters, as explained in the abstract.

As this thesis constitutes a first ever study I do not apologise for its length, nor for the fact that, as a broad survey of a writer's work, it has a frequently descriptive character. The biographical aspect has been included in the analysis because, in Maugham's words, "After all, it is the personality of the author that gives his work its special interest." 2

Another governing principle in this thesis is expressed by Dr Johnson's view that "There is indeed some tenderness due to living writers" but that:

the duty of criticism is neither to depreciate, nor to dignify by partial representations, but to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover; and to promulgate the determination of truth, whatever she shall dictate. (3)

I would stand by the words of the theologian Karl Barth, that "I cannot, for my part, think it possible for an interpreter honestly to reproduce the meaning of any author unless he dares to accept the condition of utter loyalty." 4

I trust that my loyalty to my living subject is apparent, though not unquestioning, and I have admired Dame Ngaio's willingness to give me carte blanche in my inquiries, with the freedom to explore and make my own connections even if, like Lady Lacklander, she might not always be able to see their relevance.

+ + + + +

I would like to express my genuine gratitude to the following people: to Ms Carol Brownlie (Head of Information Services, Radio New Zealand) for helping so efficiently in the provision of radio archive material; to Wendy Morrison and the telecine staff of South Pacific
Television in Christchurch for their efforts in securing and showing me "Three Several Quests" and "Three New Zealand Women", and to Mrs Wendy Osborne of the BCNZ TV Production Library for granting the permission to use my transcripts of these films in this project.

I am also very grateful to David Young, a staff journalist on The Listener for giving me access to the relevant Listener files; to Mrs Dorothy Olding of Harold Ober Associates for the publishing details of Dame Ngaio's novelettes; to Mrs Elizabeth Walter of Collins and Co. (London); to Mr Peter Jones (Sussex) for so speedily sending copies of his photographs of Dame Ngaio on a BBC TV interview; to Dulcie Gallaher for pointing out the story "Moonshine" and providing a copy for me; to Mrs Pat Hill for information concerning Dame Ngaio's production of Distant Point; to Elric Hooper for taking time out from a frenetic schedule; to my sister Suzanne Richards, for taking the excellent colour photograph of Dame Ngaio in this volume; to the friendly and helpful staff of the James Hight Library at Canterbury University, particularly concerning interloans; to Dorothy Walker and Denise Muschamp for their moral support, and especially to Professor J C Garrett and Dr Cherry Hankin for their advice and interest in this unusual thesis topic. I particularly value Dr Hankin's willingness to supervise research into an academically unorthodox domain (i.e., detective fiction) and for all her encouragement in the task at hand.

Special thanks are due to my typists, Sandra McGregor and Mrs Noeline Drayton for their gargantuan task of converting my scrawl into an intelligible manuscript.

Finally, and above all, I owe my greatest debt of gratitude to the inspiration of this thesis - to Dame Ngaio Marsh herself, literally without whose assistance it would have been/far more arduous - almost impossible - undertaking. I have long held that, not knowing authors,
some literary critics fabricate miasmas of arbitrary and unwarranted speculation, and this current effort has been a minor gesture in the direction of what Dr Margaret Mead once called cultural "salvage" work so as to hopefully avoid this pitfall.

Dame Ngaio's invaluable contribution lay in allowing me free and generous access to her bookshelves and other personal materials, and granting me her busy time for many interviews of variable duration.

This thesis purposes to show that Dame Ngaio, with her ready wit, cheerful disposition and great charm, fully deserves the title of a "national treasure" applied to her on a recent television interview. My only hope is that this thesis may prove worthy of her.

- BRUCE HARDING.

NOTES:

Miss Ngaio Marsh being interviewed for "Women of Today" by Miss Jeanne Heal. Broadcast BBC September 14, 1950.

(Photograph: Peter H Jones.)
CHAPTER ONE

THE PRIME OF A GRANDMASTER IN CRIME.
On April 23, 1899 a daughter was born to Henry and Rose Marsh in a small house in the genteel Christchurch suburb of Fendalton. This was the same day that Vladimir Nabokov was born and, more significantly in the Marsh connection, April 23 is St George's Day as well as the legendary birthdate of William Shakespeare. 1899 was itself a turbulent year to end the nineteenth century: the South African (Boer) War broke out and Sigmund Freud's *Die Traumdeutung* was published. On the artistic scene, Noël Coward was born, Henry James' *The Awkward Age* was published, Ruskin College (Oxford) was formed and the Boots Booklovers' Library was set up by Jessie Boot in England.

The birth of this child, Edith Ngaio, in the closing years of Victoria's reign and her growing up in the twilight - albeit a transferred one - of the Edwardian era were to prove very crucial in terms of shaping the prevailing temper and tone of her outlook, particularly when Ngaio Marsh set out to experiment in writing as a young woman.

Ngaio was the first - and remained the only - child in the Marsh household. She declares that although her parents were certainly unconventional (vividly attested to in *Black Beech and Honeydew*, her autobiography), they were very upright people. Dame Ngaio has written there that "I adored, defied and finally obeyed my mother and believed that she understood me better than anyone else in my small world." She says of her father:

> His rectitude was enormous: I have never known a man with higher principles. He was thrifty. He was devastatingly truthful. In many ways he was wise and he had a kind heart, and a nice sense of humour. (2)

In fact, it can be said that aspects of the Claires in *Colour Scheme* (1943) have a more than wayward resemblance to Marsh's parents. In that novel Colonel Claire says of "theatricals", "We don't want that sort" (*CS* One, III:23), and Mrs Claire's habit of mind is said to be Victorian (*Five*, 1:82). Dr Ackrington's ardent rationalism recalls that of Marsh's truculently
rationalistic father, but the most considerable link is provided in the description of the Claire's "poor but proud gentility" (One, II:15), for Ngaio Marsh has written that her immediate background was of the "have-not" variety and that she was born "of what the Victorians used to call poor but genteel parentage." Dame Ngaio, then, gives us to understand that she came from the "other side of the tracks" from a financial standpoint. Henry Edmund Marsh came from an English middle-class family in Essex near Epping and seemed perennially doomed to financial penury. Henry Marsh was possibly descended from some piratical de Mariscos, Lords of Lundy:

They were kicked out of Lundy on general grounds of lawlessness and turned up in Kent, where they changed their names to Marsh and many, perhaps on the rebound from piracy, turned Quaker. (3) Ngaio Marsh explains that "de Marisco" literally means "of the marsh" and these kinsfolk were kicked out of Lundy twice, finally settling in Romneymarsh (Kent). One of the more commendable forebears, Richard Stephen Marsh, "an Esquire of the Bedchamber" in the reign of Charles II (1660-85), took a compassionate interest in the plight of George Fox the Quaker while he was in the Tower.

Dame Ngaio's great-uncle, her father's Uncle William, governed the colony of Hong Kong in the absences of Governor Pope-Hennessey but his official posts were as the highly respected Administrator, Commander-in-Chief and Vice-Admiral of Hong Kong. William Marsh retired from these tasks in 1887 and settled down in New Zealand. His wife's brother, a Mr McKenzie, had founded the Colonial Bank here and as Ngaio Marsh writes, "Indefatigable in good works, [Uncle William] sent for my father" to come out from England to join the firm. Marsh adds that "No sooner were my father's feet planted on the ladder than, owing to political machinations, the Colonial Bank broke. Uncle William returned to England. My father got a clerkship in the Bank of New Zealand and there remained until he retired." It transpires that Mr (later Sir) Joseph Ward committed some
unscrupulous action which sent the whole enterprise awry, and Dame Ngaio reports that "the name of Joseph Ward stank in my father’s nostrils!" 4 Clive Litt notes that Ward’s bubble burst in 1896, as the Ward Farmers’ Association "owed the Colonial Bank more than £50,000."

Although Ward was probably not responsible for the speculation and mismanagement that had caused the firm’s crisis, he had, as Colonial Treasurer, attempted to avert his own bankruptcy by having the Colonial Bank taken over by the Bank of New Zealand, which had itself been saved in 1894 by a Government guarantee of £2 million share capital. His conduct castigated by a Supreme Court judge and the subject of strident public outcry, Ward was forced to resign from the Cabinet and the House of Representatives in June 1896. (7)

Henry Marsh’s anger would have been increased when, in the year of Ngaio’s birth, Ward resumed the portfolios of Post and Telegraph and Customs and Commerce, and when he became Prime Minister after Seddon’s death in 1906!

Consequently Dame Ngaio recalls that her upbringing "wasn’t at all an indulged life - we were very hard up and had to learn thrift and taking it the hard way." 8 (As an example, she felt worse off than many of her peers at St Margaret’s College. 9)

On Ngaio Marsh’s mother’s side her maternal grandfather was Edward Seager, an enterprising emigrant who arrived at Lyttelton in 1851. His grandfather "was completely ruined by the economic disturbances that followed the emancipation of slaves in the West Indies. As the Society of Friends was in a considerable measure responsible for this admirable reform, it is not too fanciful, perhaps, to suggest that one great-grandfather may have had a share in the other’s undoing." 2 Marsh adds that all the planters "went bust" because the emancipation was badly timed; the slaves were freed and the crop was either brought in too soon or not harvested at all. Edward Seager ("Gramp"), died at the age of 94 when Dame Ngaio was twenty-three years old. 10 If her father’s side of the family had inclinations to piracy, then Gramp represented the solid side of law and order because he worked in the austere Lyttelton Prison as a Sergeant and, at the age of twenty-four, designed the first police uniform
"which he wore when he made a number of exciting arrests including that of a famous sheep-stealer [McKenzie, no less] and a gigantic Negro murderer." Marsh adds,

he was put in charge of the first gaol built in the Province but left his job to become superintendent of the new mental asylum: Sunnyside. (II)

Grandfather Seager came to know that English literary enfant terrible, Samuel Butler, and stayed with him out in his little hut at Mesopotamia Station ("Erewhon"). (Butler also visited Ac'land and Tripp, founders of the Mt Peel station, a locality with which Dame Ngaio was later to become well acquainted.) Legendary Seager's mesmeric activities and his relish for theatricals for the Sunnyside patients, a very advanced approach to mental affliction.

Seager married a Miss Coster who, of course, became Dame Ngaio's maternal grandmother ("Gram") and who her grand-daughter describes as "rather austere and extremely conventional but she had a twinkle." Gram was second generation New Zealander whose family can be traced back to Gloucestershire; since Black Beech and Honey Dew was published, Dame Ngaio has learnt that the Costers ultimately derived from continental stock - the Kosters - one of whom invented printing ("the European Caxton"), probably in the vicinity of Antwerp or Amsterdam.

The Seagers' daughter, Rose Elizabeth, inherited her father's passion for acting. In 1881 Edward Seager asked the Canterbury College Dialectic Society to repeat their production of Much Ado About Nothing at Sunnyside, and, later in the 1880's Dorothy Crowther reports, that Miss Seager took "the leading part" in a local production of Victorien Sardou's comedy A Scrap of Paper. Dame Ngaio's father and his brothers and sisters in England were very keen on amateur theatricals and Ngaio Marsh writes of her father's "talking to the friendly house-pixies who [replied] in falsetto voices" when she was very small. Dame Ngaio also vividly remembers his Christmas act:
I have no idea when I left off believing in Father Christmas. It was a completely painless transition. The pretence was long kept up between my father and me as a greatly relished joke. He would come out to the verandah in the warm dark when I was still awake and would growl in a buffoonish voice: "Very c-o-o-o-o-l d in the chimney to-night. Who have we here? A good little girl or a bad little girl? I must consult my notes."

Marsh has said, "One of the first things I remember was my mother and father rehearsing plays. I lived with the theatre from the day I was born. It was going on in the house all the time."  

The Marshes may have been poor but they still managed to employ a maid and it is apparent that Ngaio Marsh's upbringing reflected a somewhat uneasy compromise between English and New Zealand values. This is best exemplified in the attitude of her mother, a New Zealander, who "doggedly determined that I should not acquire the accent."  

While Henry Marsh "talked an awful lot about England and about London" Mrs Marsh "had the same feeling about it although she had never been there." One can clearly see that the die for Dame Ngaio's New Zealand-England ambivalence was cast. Aside from the matter of accent, Mrs Marsh kept a close watch on the reading matter which her precocious daughter devoured. Dame Ngaio remarks that two books, Haeckel's *Evolution of Man* and Elinor Glen's *Three Weeks*, were hidden. Young Ngaio found the latter herself and "it bored me to sobs!"  

Ngaio recalls her early determination to read and also her tendency as a youngster to use long words wrongly to impress. 

Dame Ngaio describes her early fixation on England as "very curious"; she remembers that her childish dreams of London were not unlike the reality, and she was particularly fascinated by a silent, jerky travelogue film called "Living London" which her family went "at least twice" to see. (Ngaio was especially fascinated with odd London names like Threadneedle Street.) The young Ngaio was afflicted with those often vivid and unpleasant dreams which are the property of highly imaginative children. Her romantic tendency is revealed when Marsh writes
of those dreams "on more propitious nights" when she "sailed and flew immense distances into slowly revolving lights, rainbow chasms and mountainous realms of incomprehensible significance, through which my father's snores surged and receded."  

A major source of terror for Ngaio came when she was barely six years old and overheard her parents rehearsing a Sutro or Sardou play (called The Fool's Paradise) about "a femme fatale who slowly poisoned her husband and was suspected and finally accused of her crime by the family doctor." Marsh says, "It seems funny now but it was agony at the time." Mrs Marsh was a very talented actress and Gramp encouraged this. Dame Ngaio says, "My mother really had entirely the professional attitude to acting" but that to have become a professional actress in her day "would have been considered a very eccentric thing indeed for a girl to do then... I don't understand now, with her talent, how she could bear not to." 

When the American Shakespearean actor George Milne came to New Zealand he got Rose Seager, aged nineteen, to play Lady Macbeth with him. Later the English actor Charles Warner visited, a friend of Edward Seager's offered to take Rose "into his company and launch her in England." She declined. He and his wife suggested that she should come as their guest to Australia and get the taste of a professional company on tour... This adventure, though she seemed to have enjoyed it, confirmed her in her resolve. The life, she once said to me, "was too messy." I have an idea that the easy emotionalism and "bohemian" habits of theatre people, while they appealed to her highly-developed sense of irony, offended her natural fastidiousness... She returned to New Zealand and after an interval of a year or two met and married my father. (22) 

Another link with the theatre was provided when a friend of Gramp's, a Mr Hoskins, as a gesture of some obligation to Edward Seager, "presented him with a little tawny-coloured plush-velvet coat in the fashion of the Regency." This was a coat belonging to the great Shakespearean actor Edmund Kean (1789-1833). Marsh writes:

When as a school-girl I fell in love simultaneously with Shakespeare and the theatre, my grandfather gave me Kean's coat. Some thirty years later a great living Shakesperian actor visited us playing Richard III and now Kean's coat belongs to Sir Laurence Olivier. (23)
Dame Ngaio remarks that she "scribbled from the word go almost. I was always writing and trying to illustrate what I had written. I did that a great deal and so did many children." She also forthrightly declares, "I was a difficult, determined, bloody-minded little girl." While she remarks that "the position of the only child is a rather eccentric one in the pattern", Dame Ngaio states that "I don't say that it led to any great unhappiness or ill-adjustment to me." She was, nonetheless, a rather nervous child.

One very definite source of unhappiness for Ngaio came when, while they still lived in Fendalton, her parents decided to send her to a Dame School of about a dozen pupils. The School was an alternative "for parents who didn't like the idea of a state school." It was held in either Gloucester or Hereford Street near Rolleston Avenue in Christchurch and was run by a teacher (the "very formidable" Miss Sibella Ross) and a governess (Miss Irving). Marsh recalls the trauma which she experienced there:

I wasn't happy at Miss Ross's but I was a highly imaginative young child and not really very strong either - rather a morbid little girl, I think, with strange fears. (20)

The reasons for this disquiet are movingly described in the autobiography. Marsh recounts one memorable morning when the children waited for Miss Irving to put them on the bus for the journey from Fendalton to the centre of the city, when the Governor went past in a carriage. Marsh saw him and his wife, but also "unless I am at fault, a little girl of about my own age of whom there will be much more to say." As Ngaio Marsh attended her Dame School between the ages of six and ten this could well have occurred in 1905, the year which Gordon Ogilvie posits for the Marshes' shift to the Cashmere hills. The governor would have been Sir (later Lord) William Lee Plunket who served in this capacity between February 1904 and June 1910. The little girl would then be his daughter, later the Hon. Mrs Tahu (Nelly) Rhodes.
The Marshes shifted house, after a pleasant summer holiday on the hills, while Ngaio still went to Miss Ross's. I would tend to suggest that the shift was made in 1905 and that the house was not finished until Ngaio was (i.e., in 1906). Henry Marsh, along with Alfred Evans, took a Valley Road property, and the date of 1906 (implying that it took at least a summer for Marton Cottage to be built) is reinforced when we recall Marsh's remark, on an NZBC television interview in 1966, that her father had her house built fifty-nine years previously. Dame Ngaio tells us that as soon as "the momentous decision" to shift was made, this was communicated to Hurst Seager, the prominent architect and cousin of Rose Marsh. Dame Ngaio has said that it was her growing up in this house and their Westland camping holidays which constituted the "halcyon days" of her busy childhood.

Ngaio continued at "Tib's" while in Cashmere and says, "I used to have to walk round to Dyers Pass Road - the tram went from there." She weathered the storm at the Dame School, principally through the companionship of two other outsiders and firm and kindly allies. One of them, Charles Carrington (an expatriate Oxford historian), wrote the volume John Robert Godley of Canterbury (1950) for the provincial Centennial, not to mention his authoritative Rudyard Kipling (1955). Roderick became a soldier and one wonders whether, on a subconscious level, the association between Roderick and his kind nature may have played an unsuspected part in Dame Ngaio's choice of Inspector Alleyn's Christian name. The cases of Carrington and Marsh seem to testify to the integrity and quality of their Dame School education.

At this time Ngaio was very happy in her Cashmere setting, getting to know the Walker brothers (of whom Dundas was to figure quite prominently in her Shakespearean productions with the students). She particularly enjoyed gallivanting across Cashmere-Bowenvale on her pony, canoeing down the Heathcote River and tobogganing on the hills.
Now that Ngaio could read, one of her literary delights was Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) with their gentle versions of Greek myths. (Ngaio especially liked the legend about Pegasus.) Her love of Kipling's *Jungle Books* and the *Just So Stories* is amply recounted in *Black Beech and Honey Dew*.

Her parents decided that Ngaio could be educated at home and between the ages of ten and thirteen Ngaio "enjoyed" the ministrations of a governess, Miss Ffitch. She describes how Miss Ffitch gave her Carlyle's *French Revolution* for Christmas: "I tried hard but failed. All that turgid and at the same time bossy, excitability was too much for me." 28 The young girl's judgement was wise, for Carlyle himself admitted his *French Revolution* to be "a savage, an Orson of a book." 19 However, Miss Ffitch laid more solid ground in choosing to introduce Ngaio to Shakespeare - somewhat inexplicably it is true - via *King Lear*, "that primordial, that cataclysmic work." 28

Ngaio relished the novels of Charles Dickens and had read *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* between the ages of seven and ten! Many years later, Dame Ngaio noted that her father "read Dickens a great deal, and I was already conditioned for him before I began reading him for myself I think." 8 Before too long she had read the entire Dickens canon, not to mention (again on her father's direction) the work of those great comic moralists whom Dickens enjoyed as a boy - Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett.

There is a beautiful episode concerning Ngaio's introduction to *David Copperfield*. This was the celebrated first train journey with her mother to Dunedin, to stay at St Clair with Mivvy Nixon. This must have been in April 1906 because just before leaving Dunedin on the ten-hour journey northwards, Mivvy's mother presented the little girl with a copy of *David Copperfield* as a seventh-birthday gift. "It became and has remained the novel to which I most often return", Dame
Ngaio says. The other literary discovery made on this memorable excursion was that of Sherlock Holmes, an enchanting encounter facilitated through copies of the London Strand magazine kept in a dining-room window seat. 30

Ngaio's only regret, when she finished with Miss Fitch to go on to St Margaret's in 1910, was that she had done next to no Latin with her governess and was far behind in it.

St Margaret's College, then a mere six months old, was run by an Anglo-Catholic order of nuns and with a headmistress - in Marsh's words - "of great culture and wisdom." It was here that Ngaio imbibed her love of history (from Canon Jones) and firmed up her commitment to theatre. From Miss Hughes Ngaio derived "an abiding passion for the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare." 31 Ngaio also met the Burton family, one of whom had a theatrical training. Their father, the vicar of St Michael's, was himself something of an actor in the pulpit - "His sermons were tours-de-force." 32 Ngaio involved herself in putting on plays for the school break-ups three years in a row. She also read and wrote stories for the Lower School girls after she became Head Prefect in 1914. Although Ngaio had written a little play, Cinderella, which was performed with cousins when she was ten, her first appearance on the stage in public was in a play called Isolene and it was staged in the St Michael's parish hall. This was a far cry from the little girl who was appalled at the prospect of a stage appearance as a youngster in a Pinero play. Shortly after this Helen Burton decided very bravely to direct Ngaio's adaptation of a George MacDonald fairy-tale which she called The Moon Princess. "In the event, it went quite well and drew good audiences." 33

The St Margaret's years were also important for Ngaio in that she became "an ardent Anglo-Catholic." 32 Her own explanation is that she took out "the uncertainties of adolescence" in Anglo-Catholic observance.
Marsh's emotional life at this time was tempestuous; she would find herself unexpectedly transported by "longeurs, unheralded gusts of joy that arose out of nothing and drove one to run the length of the room and launch oneself, exultant, face downwards, on one's bed." At Fourteen, with the onset of "boy-consciousness", Ngaio "fell in love" with a retired Dean, aged about seventy-three. She notes "He...reminded me of Mr Rochester" and has stated on another occasion that she fell for the novel *Jane Eyre* "like a plummet" when at school.

For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

"I took my adolescence out in religion at St Margaret's. It was a High Church school and I think all the ceremonial ties up really with what was happening to me at that time." These words of Dame Ngaio seem to imply that her intense experience of Edwardian Anglo-Catholicism was an extension of her growing sense of theatre. Certainly, there seemed to be a fundamental identity between her aesthetic and religious impulses. Aldous Huxley wrote in 1945, "it was through the aesthetic that I came to the spiritual" while Marsh's experience was exactly the reverse. She seems to have found an interest in ritual, like William Morris and Walter Pater, both short-lived Anglo-Catholics and prophets of aestheticism. For Pater in particular, like his Marius, everything was a ritual. His biographer, Gerald Monsman, writes of Pater's "early taste for religious ceremony" and his "aspiration to become a clergyman." These basics were readily converted into a
virtual religion of art; Monsman refers to Pater's "curious clinging to High Church ritual without the substance of belief." 38 As Pater himself wrote in the essay "Coleridge's Writings" (1866):

Religious belief, the craving for objects of belief, may be refined out of our hearts, but they must leave their sacred perfume, their ritual sweetness, behind. (38)

Closer hints to the young Ngaio's experience can be found - as she says - in Sir Compton Mackenzie's Sinister Street (1913). Apart from the insight into Michael Fane's Anglo-Catholic raptures, the novel provides a further parallel with his anguished plea "Oh, mother, when will I read writing?" (Ch. I), his "ghastly dreams" and "histrionic pastimes" (Ch. II). Kenneth Young describes Sinister Street as a portrait of "an often anguished adolescence" 39, while Frank Swinnerton makes the point that the theatre was in Mackenzie's blood, "a fact which should not be forgotten in any consideration of his work." 40

Also connected with Ngaio's markedly aesthetic sensibility was the sudden manifestation of beatitude which she experienced on that warm summer morning at Glentui in 1912, and with which the autobiography opens. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "Revelation is the disclosure of the soul", adding:

These [moments] are always attended by the emotion of the sublime. For this communication is an influx of the Divine mind into our mind. It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of the sea of life. (41)

Ngaio's sudden "flooding of happiness" she describes as a possible "moment of truth." 42 This would connect with Emerson's talk about "the soul's communion of truth", and also with Paterian "epiphany", Virginia Woolf's "moments of being" and C S Lewis' rapturous sudden experience of "Joy" (cf. Surprised by Joy [Bles, 1932]).

Although now Dame Ngaio finds herself an agnostic, she respects the work of the church even if she can no longer accept its first premises. Marsh is a liberal who sees the moral utility of the Christian faith and
her admiration for the Church of England is reminiscent of Matthew Arnold's view that the Anglican Church is "a great national society for the promotion of goodness." Certainly it was for this reason that her parents decided to send Ngaio to St Margaret's - "Perhaps they considered that the, as it were, personified focus given by a church school to pure ethics, would be salutary. If so, I think they were right." Thus, Dame Ngaio's strong ethical sense was engendered by the vague Anglican doctrinal strictures of this school and the religio-humanism of her parents.

Yet at this time Ngaio found another outlet for her adolescent energies in painting. As early as the years at Dame School, Ngaio felt that she wanted to be a painter. While in her last year at St Margaret's, Dame Ngaio spent two afternoons a week (by special arrangement) in the antique room of the Canterbury University College School of Art. She speaks of the "airless fervour of the life room" and the endless procession of still-lifes, her painting with friends before the foothills of South Canterbury and beside the lakes of Westland. Ngaio Marsh said years later:

I really was just among the number, that were merely working off in the regulation manner something that adolescents try to work off... I tried to express myself with paint, with charcoal and pencils and I woke up one fine morning and realized that I would never be the painter that I thought I was setting out to be. (45)

Be that as it may, Ngaio began full-time study as an art student at Canterbury University College in 1915, where she stayed for four years supported by scholarships. Marsh says that painting then was "such an obsession" with her that she would not dabble with it; the prospect totally filled her horizon. And despite her disclaimer that her painting never "panned out right", Dame Ngaio added in 1966:

It's something I've always felt I can't fiddle with. I know if I started again and got the sting of stretched canvas I wouldn't be able to do anything else. (8)
Ngaio stayed at the College until 1919, by which time she was beginning to feel that she had gone as far as she could there. (Olivia Spencer-Bower, who started there in the 'twenties, has described the Art School atmosphere as "stuffy." 47) After an eventful trip to the West Coast Ngaio met socially the Editor (E C Huie) of the vanguard Christchurch evening newspaper The Sun. Edward Huie was impressed with the young woman's vivid account of her experience and asked Ngaio to try and write it up. This she very promptly did, Huie published it and "The Night Train from Grey" (which proved very popular) was Dame Ngaio's "first venture in professional writing." 48 This effort began an association for Ngaio with The Sun which lasted intermittently between around 1918 and 1925. It must, however, be said that Dame Ngaio was very fortunate in this break, for the Sun was only formed in 1914 and modelled itself on London's Daily Mail. Monte Holcroft writes that this newspaper, was bright and progressive, offering a new experience for readers accustomed to staid presentation... The Sun was a phenomenon, a little ahead of its time in New Zealand. (49)

"Robin Hyde" (Iris Wilkinson), writing about this progressive force in New Zealand journalism, observed:

Fairburn, Mason, C R Allen, Alison Grant, Monte Holcroft, Ngaio Marsh, a score of writers whose names count to-day... came to light in Sun supplement days. (50)

Ngaio began writing short stories at this time, an enterprise in which she was influenced by those of E M Forster in particular. She very dearly regrets the loss of her "bastard offspring" of Forster's The Celestial Omnibus", and at this time came to realize that "although, during those long visits to Westland, my whole intent was to translate what I felt about it in terms of paint, the more valid but scarcely recognised impulse was towards words." 51 Marsh remarks that her camping holidays in the summer of 1919-1920 "were the last I was to spend... in Westland. The coming year was to bring a change." 52
"Of course, Allan Wilkie and his slender Burne-Jones wife are inevitably associated with Shakespeare in New Zealand." 53 These words of "Robin Hyde" have certainly proved true for Dame Ngaio Marsh. The Allan Wilkie Company had seasons in Christchurch in September 1919 (Hindle Wakes by Houghton) and in April 1920 (A Temporary Gentleman and a one-night performance of Hindle Wakes again). The 1919 production of Hindle Wakes was voted as "one of the best ever" seen by Christchurch playgoers (Lyttelton Times April 22, 1920, p.2).

Ngaio Marsh recalls how the opening night of the Wilkie production of Hamlet "was the most enchanted I was ever to spend in the theatre." 54 This was on the first of three Wilkie tours which came while Dame Ngaio was an art student. She notes fondly, "They were our gods" 55 and describes how, between the second and third visits of the Wilkie company (that is, between September 1919 and April 1920), she wrote another play - a "terrible stap-me and sink-me melodrama" called The Medallion, "entirely derivative, of course." 8 Her mother encouraged Ngaio to show Mr Wilkie the play. "It is the only time I have ever asked for a completely outside criticism of anything I have written." 56

Maurice Shadbolt writes that Wilkie "said polite things to the youngster. The upshot was a job as actress." 57 In fact, in Marsh's account, Wilkie took The Medallion "quite seriously" 8 and told Ngaio, "You're going to do something in the theatre" 45 and for that reason, employed her so she would learn the theatrical ropes. Marsh has described the joys of her experience (1920) with the Wilkies as "a winter of content":

I don't think I've ever been happier in my life than I was then. It was an old-fashioned company, an actor-manager's-company in the great Burbage-Kean tradition. (8) Marsh describes this as "the real break" 46. The Wilkie repertoire was to "boil the pot" with two intellectual plays and a thriller, then Allan
Wilkie would rush home to England and engage expensive actors, actresses and wardrobes and return here. To boil the pot again, the company would often tour the West Coast with melodramas. Ngaio's tour as an "apprentice" actress is thoroughly recorded in Black Beech and Honeydew. Dame Ngaio relates how Mr Wilkie's offer of acting experience rescued her from the attentions of a middle-aged admirer, yet the tour itself provided the setting for a blameless romance. When the Wilkie tour disbanded, Ngaio (after her parents had allowed her to act on the proviso that she would stay in New Zealand) very cunningly took the opportunity to join Miss Rosemary Rees's Comedy Company. She toured with the Rees Company (headed by the same Miss Rees who writes romantic novels) in 1922 for several months in the North Island. It may have been on this tour that Ngaio became unofficially engaged. Sadly, however, her fiancé died. She notes now:

"I really never wanted to be married. It would have been a mistake - of that I'm sure. I was very fond of him - it's hard to make people believe this. I mean, women are always supposed to want to get married very much... I'm very fond of children and get on very well with them, but no, I'm quite sure it would never have worked." (20)

In 1922, after the three-months with the Rees Company, Ngaio came home and wrote a one-act fantasy play called Little Housebound and, with Kiore ("Tor") King and Richard ("Webster") Lanauze, she did a "three-handed tour" with two other pieces in the North Island (Hastings and Havelock North).

Ngaio returned, finally, to Christchurch where she stayed between 1923 and 1928. From 1923 onwards, Dame Ngaio produced a number of shows for a large organization called "Charities Unlimited." Firstly, Mrs Marsh and Ngaio were asked on the committee. Then, about a week before dress rehearsals, a Mrs Hume (a professional) became ill and Ngaio was asked to take charge of the pantomime (possibly Jack and the Beanstalk).
On the strength of the work she did for that as a producer, Dame Ngaio was asked to do the next annual production, *Bluebell in Fairyland*. These were "big shows" on a "pretty large scale" which ran for a fortnight or three-weeks' season at the Theatre Royal in Christchurch. In 1927 Ngaio and Fred Reade Wauchop set up a School for Dance and Drama in Worcester Street to give speechcraft training. It was at the committee meeting for "Charities Unlimited" that Ngaio met again that little girl whom she had seen in the carriage around 1905 with the Governor.

She had married, in England, the son of that house in Fendalton which I had visited with such delight. She had returned to New Zealand with her husband and three children to whom she was about to add the fourth... (58)

Out of the friendship which then blossomed Ngaio and Nelly Rhodes (who is described under the guise of "Charlot" in *Black Beech*) created a vaudeville group, which Ngaio produced, and which "directly and indirectly" raised some £12,000 for various charities. Ngaio stayed with this family who she came to call "The Lampreys" in their grandiloquent farmhouse until they decided, paradoxically, that a return to England would constitute an economy measure! This was in 1927. Dame Ngaio writes, "when the Lampreys had gone, their friends looked blankly at each other and felt rather as children do when the plug is pulled out of a swimming pool and summer goes down the drain." Ngaio was not inactive, however, for long. Apart from stray glances at the notion of a New Zealand novel, Dame Ngaio and a group of her painting colleagues secured for themselves a room for use as a studio in the Whitcoulls building in Cashel Street. This was the creation of what has come to be termed "The Group." Ngaio Marsh was a foundation member along with Eve Page (or Poulson as she was then), Viola MacMillan Brown, Edith Wall, Margaret Anderson, Billy Baverstock, Cora Wilding and William Montgomery.

They held their first exhibition in their studio in 1927 and held a second one (when Marsh was in England) in the CSA Gallery
in Durham Street in 1929. The keynote of the Group was their simple
desire to have a room of their own (in this they followed the example of
Dame Ngaio's friends in the 1914-19 period). The principal innovation
was to exhibit as a group and to break the grip of the established (and
often hide-bound) Arts Societies in their selections of what should and,
equally important, should not be hung.

Ngaio received the call from the Lampreys to come and join them
in their Georgian house in Buckinghamshire. Her father offered to pay
the fare and in September or October 1928 (not autumn as she says in the
autobiography) Dame Ngaio set sail for the Homeland on a ten week journey
on the last voyage of an old coal-burning vessel, the Balranald. Marsh
very movingly describes her final, emotional moments with her devoted
parents:

After dinner my father settled in his chair, opened his paper and
lit his pipe. He caught my eye, nodded and made a hideous grimace which I ineffectually returned. My mother and I tried to be-
have unemotionally. When I saw headlamps coming up the lane, I
hugged my parents and ran down the hill.

At once, it seems to me now, with the closing of the house door
and the slam of the garden gate, I moved into a new life. (61)

In her 1966 TV interview, Dame Ngaio stated that she had led "what's called
a protected life."

I was beginning to feel, I know, at that time that I wanted to
step through a door into a more open, a more hazardous life, and
things happened to make it possible. (8)

Undoubtedly the introduction to the delights of civilized England as
effected by the Lampreys provided a definite 'Alice in Wonderland'
change of perspective:

That, of course, was an extraordinary change in one's life. Having
lived here in a very modest, quiet family sort of life, I suddenly
found myself in a huge Georgian house in England leading what was
really the sort of typical thing of the 'thirties - the kind of
thing Evelyn Waugh wrote about. It was between the wars, it was
that sort of life - something entirely different, and that has
been grist to my mill. (8)
Mrs Rhodes, Ngaio informs us, had "an extremely illustrious grandmother" with a passion for charitable work. When this august woman organized a charity bazaar (probably for famine relief in India) Ngaio and Nelly were conscripted to provide its "artsy-crafty" stall. They toiled away in the deserted ballroom of the Buckinghamshire home, creating "quantities of lampshades, blotters and funny rhymes for bathroom and lavatory doors." As Christmas (probably 1929) was approaching along with another recurrent Lamprey monetary crisis, Nelly and Ngaio asked, "why shouldn't we make all these ghastly things to sell for us?" The Rhodes' now had five children to keep (one of whom, Denys, was born in Ireland and later wrote Fly Away Peter [1952], a New Zealand secret service intrigue, and Locusts in Africa). Therefore Ngaio and Mrs Rhodes took a little lock-up shop in the Brompton Road and "did jolly well." Spurred on by this unexpected profit from their trade in various items of household bric-à-brac, the two women took on another shop in Beauchamp Place on a longer lease. Here they became house decorators; Dame Ngaio says "We were terribly like Noël Coward's shop-girls - we knew nothing whatever about it. We made the most fabulous mistakes!" This must have been in 1930.

Shortly after this, Ngaio learned that her mother would be sailing out to join her and to get her first glimpse of England. The Rhodes family decided to move from Buckinghamshire to London and Dame Ngaio and Mrs Marsh stayed with them for a time in their new S W 3 flat in 1931. The Marsh ladies soon found themselves "a basement flat, semi-furnished, in Bourne Street, off Cliveden Place on the borders of Pimlico." From here they set out to see plays like Pirandello's Six Characters in Search of an Author (which they saw early in 1932). It was probably just after this that Ngaio was left alone in the flat while her mother "was away on a motor trip with some friends." She had gradually been turn-
ing her mind again to writing; in 1929 Dame Ngaio was elected a mem-
ber 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. Ngaio, who inherited her father's catholic taste in
reading, had been reading the odd detective story - "I was not a heavy
reader in the genre but I had, off and on, turned an idea for a crime
story over in my mind." 65

It was a depressingly wet weekend in London, redolent of Gershwin's
"A Foggy Day in London Town." Dame Ngaio had just read a Christie or
Sayers novel to beguile the time.

The room had grown quite dark when I pulled on a mackintosh, took
an umbrella, and beat my way through rain-fractured lamplight to
the stationer's shop. It smelled of damp newsprint, cheap maga-
zines, and wet people. I bought six twopenny exercise books, a
pencil and pencil-sharpener and splashed back to the flat. (66)

It could easily have been twenty-six years earlier on a rainy day
at St Clair, when an intelligent little girl became transported into the
cosy delights of the Sherlock Holmes world; when the "rain beat down,
not on the windows of a New Zealand house but across those of a gas-lit
upstairs room in a London street. It glistened on the roofs of handsom-
cabs and bounced off cobble-stones. It mingled with the cry of newsboys
and eccentric improvisations upon the fiddle." 30

Be that as it may, Ngaio had the day before visited the Picture
Gallery of her father's old school, Dulwich College. She remembered its
founder, the tragedian Edward Alleyn, and as "sort of compliment" to her
father christened her new detective with that surname. In a matter of
weeks, and very largely to amuse her mother Dame Ngaio says, she wrote the
bulk of her first novel, A Man Lay Dead. Her mother returned alone to
New Zealand where she later became very ill. Later in 1932 Ngaio left
her freshly typed manuscript with a Hughes Massie agent and returned home
on little more than a day's notice, having learned that her mother was
now critically ill.
Ngaio arrived in New Zealand in November 1932 where her mother shortly thereafter died of a long and lingering illness. On arrival in Christchurch, Miss Marsh discovered that the Canterbury Repertory Society had been founded (in 1928) after she left and that Tor King had earlier produced her Little Housebound for Repertory. About three months after returning home, Marsh was reportedly astonished to learn that her agent had placed A Man Lay Dead with a publisher, Geoffrey Bles (London). Bles had the typescript for about a year and finally published it in 1934. He was to publish all her early novels up until Overture to Death (1939) when Collins took Marsh's publishing over by arrangement (Bles always made mock complaints about losing his gems to large publishers).

Around the time of this exciting news, Ngaio became very ill (early in 1933) and spent a wearisome three months in St George's Hospital. There she was under the surgical skill of Dr Henry Jellett (with whom she wrote her only novelistic collaboration, The Nursing Home Murder [1935]) and Sir Hugh Acland. (She had, in her art student days taught Sir Hugh's son Colin and had stayed near Big Mount Peel with a friend in those days.)

Ngaio exhibited again with the Group in 1935, 1936, 1938, 1940 and, finally, in 1947. She finished Death in Ecstasy in November, 1935, wrote Vintage Murder in 1936 and left late in 1937 (with Artists in Crime ready for Collins) on a three months tour of Europe with Betty Cotterill and another New Zealand friend. A highlight of this trip to London was her invitation (from Dorothy Sayers) to attend the installation of E C Bentley as Head of the Detection Club in a meeting held at the famed Dorchester Hotel. Vintage Murder had already been published in May 1937, and the three women returned to New Zealand (with war clouds gathering) before the winter of 1938.

It was in 1938 that Ngaio's detective novels gained a wider recognition and accord with the publication of Artists in Crime. The good of
the reviewers was aptly expressed in The Spectator:

Artists in Crime is Miss Marsh's best, and I will eat my deer-stalker hat if she does not soon qualify for the next vacancy among the Big Ten of detective fiction. (69)

1938 also saw Marsh's entry into the American market, albeit through the means of a wily publishing villain, Lee Furman, who published three of her novels of 1938 and 1939. Marsh's American agents, Harold Ober Associates, were wary of Furman but wisely considered it essential for Dame Ngaio to penetrate the U.S market. After signing a comprehensive contract, Furman faked insolvency and Marsh lost more than a few pennies. However, Obers were soon to establish Marsh with the prestigious publishing house of Little, Brown, by whom she has been very professionally treated ever since.

Ngaio began to work in earnest for repertory societies in Dunedin, Ashburton and Christchurch as a free-lance producer (a notable production was Drinkwater's A Man's House, which she brought the Dunedin Repertory to Christchurch to perform in aid of some local orphanages). In April 1939 Overture to Death was published and in May of that year Ngaio finished writing Death at the Bar. In September of that year New Zealand and her allies were at war with Germany. Dame Ngaio became a head section leader for the Red Cross, driving a bus to ferry returned soldiers home from Burwood hospital to outlying farms. This was a fortnightly 60-hour duty.

In 1940 Surfeit of Lampreys was published by Little, Brown under the U.S title Death of a Peer. In 1941 Death and the Dancing Footman appeared and she did more work with the Dunedin and Wellington Repertory Societies. Noël Coward visited to entertain the troops and boost morale and Ngaio met him in Christchurch, then again in Wellington (they were at the same hotel while Ngaio produced Emlyn Williams' The Corn is Green for the Wellington Rep.). She then continued to tour the North Island in preparation for the New Zealand volume (1942) for the Collins "Britain and the Commonwealth in Pictures" series.
In 1942 Dame Ngaio produced Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1941) for Christchurch Repertory, and she was rather timorously approached by Lyall Holmes and Colin Allen, then two Canterbury University College students, with the news that their Drama Society ("Dramasoc") was in the doldrums. Ngaio was asked to produce *Outward Bound* "for the hell of it. I said I would." This was the extremely simple and humble beginning to the long-standing and legendary Marsh productions of Canterbury student-players for over twenty years. Ngaio afterwards watched Professor Greville Pocock's productions with these students. This part of the history is one of the most confused, but it seems likely that before *Outward Bound* was finished, the cast asked Ngaio to direct them again the following year. She agreed provided it would be *Hamlet*. (Dame Ngaio had tried to stage Shakespeare at frequent intervals all through the 'thirties and 'forties, but the idea was rebuffed as sure-fire "box-office poison").

*Hamlet* was directed by Jack Henderson and Marie Donaldson in the initial stages as Dame Ngaio was too consumed by her Red Cross transport responsibilities. After two rehearsals Jack Henderson (a brilliant Hamlet: a nineteen-year-old Englishman completing his education here) confessed their need of Ngaio. She obtained cultural leave of absence and "took it over." It is not correct to state, as does Dorothy Crowther, that "In 1943 Ngaio Marsh revived the *Repertory* Society with an enthralling *Hamlet* in modern dress." The fact was that Ngaio took sole charge of *Hamlet* for its many revivals beyond the first opening "season" (Little Theatre, August 2-7, 1943). In December 1943 the Drama Society hired the Radiant Hall but it was not a Repertory production even then.

Paul Molineaux (current head of the S I S) played Laertes and Douglas Lilburn composed music especially for the play and Maurice Clare led the group.
When *Othello* was produced in July 1944 (with Molineaux in the lead role) Colin Allan (now Sir Colin) had the temerity to approach that veteran *régisseur* Mr Dan O'Connor in Auckland. Mr O'Connor came and watched a special performance of *Hamlet* and then proposed to take the students (and their producer) on tour with both plays in the long vacation (to Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland between December 1944 and January 1945).

Before that tour commenced, Dame Ngaio somehow managed to find time to stage Afinogenov's *Distant Point* at the end of October 1944 in a combined Canterbury College-Repertory production for the Patriotic Fund.

In 1948 Dame Ngaio received two well-merited accolades: she became an Honorary Lecturer in Drama at Canterbury University and received an OBE for "service in connection with drama and literature in New Zealand." However sadness mingled with triumph, for in the following spring Dame Ngaio's father died.

When Laurence and Vivian Olivier came to New Zealand after this with the old Vic (another O'Connor venture) Ngaio's students were asked if they would care to entertain the Oliviers in the Little Theatre after their performance. Dame Ngaio was able to get Brigid ("Biddy") Lenihan and Bernard Kearns started on shaping up "the first act of my obsession: *Six Characters in Search of an Author.*" After O'Connor saw the final product, he inquired about interest in an Australian tour of a revived *Othello* and completed *Six Characters*. Thus was born the hectic three-week tour of Australia in January-February 1949 - a tour which Dame Ngaio calls "one of the most ex-citing things that has ever happened to me." It also served as a prelude to the establishment of the British Commonwealth Theatre Company (BCTC) under D D O'Connor's management and Ngaio Marsh's direction.
To this end Dame Ngaio left in 1949 for London, arriving there in 1950. In July 1949 she received the honour of entering paperbacks by Penguin Books' decision to publish one million copies of her novels on the same day. This had only previously happened to Agatha Christie in 1948, where ten novels would each be published in 100,000 titles. Other authors to receive "tens" in subsequent years were Margery Allingham and Georges Simenon. Present at the "Marsh Million" on July 22 were Sir William Collins, Ivor Brown (a Marsh fan), Tom A., Nancy Spain and others.

The period in the Little Theatre which John Pocock characterized as "The Golden Age" (1943-48) was drawing to a close, though not without achieving substantial results. In 1964 Marsh wrote:

I do not think we make too complacent a claim if we say that largely as a result of these tours, the attitude of New Zealand amateurs towards Shakespeare changed. From then onwards most of the established societies began to produce his plays. (74)

Ngaio Marsh summed up her own approach to Shakespeare in these words:

The plays of Shakespeare, if they are done with heart, if they're done straightforwardly, if they are done with an immense expenditure of energy and with a real respect for the text, have something that no other dramatic writing has for any audience. (45)

In January-February 1950 Dame Ngaio produced Six Characters for a fortnight's season at the Embassy Theatre in London (Swiss Cottage district). Bruce Mason took the role of the pianist in this production, one which later veteran film director John Schlesinger filled on the BCTC Tour in New Zealand.

1951 was another year of triumph and trial. Dame Ngaio published Opening Night and she was voted "one of the ten best active mystery writers by an international poll of experts" (Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, September, 1951). One of her greatest surprises at this time was to find herself something of a minor celebrity (it was at this time that the photograph prefacing this chapter was taken). As Colin Watson remarks,
she was interviewed, broadcast and televised in a country where she was surprised to find "detective fiction being discussed as a tolerable form of reading by people whose opinions one valued". In New Zealand, apparently, the form was still suspect in 1950. (75)

Watson has put his finger on a long-standing fact about Ngaio Marsh: her fame in New Zealand has until more recently rested on her theatrical work, with an unhealthy suspicion of her fictions.

Marsh brought the B C T C out to open with Shaw's The Devil's Disciple in Sydney, then on wards to New Zealand. She points out that the Company's future plans were always tentative and a secondary consideration, and in 1954 described the experience as a year's "tryout. It was a confusing, a baffling, an exciting, an exhilarating and at the same time a disappointing experience." 45 Yet W J Mountjoy Jr wrote in Landfall that the visit "was a most stimulating and invigorating experience" for audiences, despite its occasional failures. 76 However, New Zealand conditions defeated the enterprise, which involved such talented personnel as Peter Howell, Geoffrey Taylor, John Schlesinger, Peter Varley, Freddy Bennett (England), Basil Henson (India), Biddy Lenihan (New Zealand), Henry Gilbert (South Africa), Wendy Gibb (Australia) and others. To make things worse, the Little Theatre was destroyed by fire in 1953.

Ngaio left New Zealand early in 1954 and in 1955 published Scales of Justice on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Collins Crime Club. In that same year Marsh attended The International Conference on Theatre History in London, with Professor James Shelley as the New Zealand representatives. In 1956 she was voted the fifth "in order of popularity among the crime writers of Great Britain and the Commonwealth" in a national contest organized by the Daily Mail and the Crime Writers' Association.

In 1962 her children's play, A Unicorn for Christmas (first written for the N Z Players in 1954), was turned into an opera by David Farquhar and given its world premiere. Also in 1962 Dame Ngaio presented the MacMillan-Brown Lectures, Three-Cornered World, on Shakespearan production
at the University of Canterbury. These were broadcast in part on the YC stations late in the following July. On October 30, 1962, Dame Ngaio became one of the first three persons to receive honorary degrees at Canterbury University. She was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Literature Degree.

Unicorn was repeated in February 1963 at a Royal Performance in Auckland for the Royal Tour of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

In 1965 Little, Brown published Dame Ngaio's long-awaited autobiography which was not published by Collins until 1966. Reviewing Black Beech and Honeydew in the New Zealand Listener, David Hal wrote, "One of the most distinguished New Zealanders of our generation, Ngaio Marsh has every right to think we would welcome her autobiography." And although Dennis McEldowney somewhat tartly remarked upon Marsh's own admissions of reticence, we should recall Roy Pascal's comment (in Design and Truth in Autobiography [1960]) that "there is always a core of darkness in the hero of the autobiography", "a lack of vivid impact... not only to our view of him, but also in his own sight." More fair was Hall's remark that the book achieves "a warmth and frankness maintained, in greater or lesser degree, until the end."

On June 11, 1966 Ngaio became Dame Ngaio Marsh in the Queen's Birthday Honours List (Civil Division).

In July 1967 she produced Twelfth Night to open the new Ngaio Marsh Theatre at the University of Canterbury, Ilam, and in June 1969 she and Elric Hooper staged A Midsummer Night's Dream there. Dame Ngaio's final Shakespearean production, Henry V, was produced at the close of 1972 to mark the opening of the James Hay Theatre in the new Christchurch Town Hall.

1978 was, in many ways, an Annus Mirabilis for Dame Ngaio, for that year saw the publication (in September) of her phenomenally successful thirtieth detective novel, Grave Mistake. In March 1978 Dame Ngaio was
given an Edgar Allan Poe "Grandmaster Award" (although she could not be present) along with Daphne Du Maurier and Dorothy Hughes, at the Second International Congress of Crime Writers held in New York. This is a very prestigious award often presented (as in this case) in recognition of an author's life-work. In July 1978 South Pacific Television screened, on successive Saturday evenings, four television adaptations of Dame Ngaio's novels (Vintage Murder, Died in the Wool, Colour Scheme and Opening Night). Marsh had, however, nothing to do with the casting nor the scripting of these programmes. It was announced in March 1979 that the American Public Broadcasting System paid more than $100,000 for these "Ngaio Marsh Theatre" episodes, and that twenty-nine other countries had purchased them. One great source of éclat in this series was provided by the superb performance of the English actor George Baker as Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn.

Another source of interest to Dame Ngaio was the appointment in 1978 of one of her student-actors, Elric Hooper, as the Artistic Director of Christchurch's Court Theatre. In England James Laurenson was working at Stratford-on-Avon and Jonathan Elsom playing to capacity houses in London with Penelope Keith in The Millionaress.

Dame Ngaio spent 1979 - her eighteenth year - continuing to write the bulk of her new novel, Photofinish, which will be published in 1980 to mark the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Collins Crime Club. This underscores the fact that Dame Ngaio is indisputably the last of the original Golden Age "Crime Queens" (Christianna Brand published her first detective novel in 1942).

Her own land has also honoured Ngaio Marsh with a series of readings taken from her autobiography on national radio in 1980. At last
this Grandmaster of Crime is gaining something of the recognition she
deserves for her writing in her native New Zealand.

Lionel Trilling once wrote that he did not believe that the study
of the genesis of works of art "is harmful to the right experience of the
work of art." He added: "So far is it from being true that the genetic
method is in itself inimical to the work of art, that the very opposite
is so; a work of art...studied in its genesis can take on an added value."

David Bleich is surely right to argue that it is "impossible to re-
cover an author only by reading his work" and this writer agrees with
Georges Poulet's statement of priority that "It is not the biography which
explicates the work, but rather the work which sometimes enables us to under-
stand the biography." It is the aim of Chapters Three to Five to dem-
onstrate how this, in a limited sense, is true in the case of Dame Ngaio
Marsh.

To further this analysis, on occasions book titles (which often have
an obvious, and thus unremarked, sense of pun) are condensed. Singing
in the Shrouds may become SIS for instance. A list of all abbreviations
is provided with the bibliography of Marsh's writings after the Chapter
References.

Another form of condensation used is to give the chapter number,
section number (if any) and page number of any given novel, such as "SIS
Twelve, 11:217." All page numbers refer to the Fontana paperback editions,
except for Surfeit of Lampreys and Final Curtain (Penguin editions), When
In Rome (New York: Berkley Medallion), Last Ditch (Collins hardcover) and
Grave Mistake (Little, Brown hardcover). The criterion had to be what
was available at the time of research.
Finally, when novels are referred to in the text the date of first publication, irrespective of whether in England or America, is given in brackets or parentheses. A good example of this is Death at the Dolphin. This novel was first published by Little, Brown in 1966 as Killer Dolphin and by Collins as Death at the Dolphin in 1967. The English title is always given here and in this case 1966 is the date used, for there is no difference whatever between these novels beyond their titles. It is a confusing publishing matter which even irritates their author.
CHAPTER TWO

DETECTIVE FICTION:

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS.
I

How are we to account for the preponderance and continued survival of that sub-genre of popular writing which is best termed "Detective Fiction"? Indeed, what are the distinguishing and defining characteristics of such fiction?

It shall be the purpose of the forthcoming to consider such broad issues, in order to place this scrutiny of Dame Ngaio Marsh's detective works in a balanced perspective. Obviously these questions are very profound: therefore I shall be merely mapping out features which could define the parameters for a further analysis of Marsh's fiction at a later date.

A further problem is that investigation into such a topic invites the retort that such studies are anomalous to - and indeed heterodox from - traditional notions about the "proper" areas of concern reserved for literary studies. In short, whenever one enters into the field of popular literature, there surely arises the spectre of academic snobbery. David Skene Melvin has pertinently written in reply to such charges that:

The crime story, detective novel, espionage tale, murder mystery, spy fiction, thriller, call it what you will, is a legitimate mode for social comment (and quite often an excellent source for social history). Literature in the classic definition of the word has been written on the subject of crime and murder - witness Hugo's Les Miserables, Dickens' Bleak House, Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, Dreiser's An American Tragedy, Faulkner's Sanctuary. The theme runs even through Durell's Alexandra Quartet. The fact that a novel's subject is crime or specific-
ally murder does not necessarily mean that it is second rate, that somehow it is "fiction" as opposed to "literature". All imaginative writing is "fiction". "Literature" is "fiction" that has become immortal. Unfortunately, at the price of their own deprivation of pleasure and learning, too many intelligentsia and arty-crafty "literatures" and the gullible who allow themselves to be taken in by these intellectual snobs cavalierly slough off crime literature. Granted that more second-rate, or worse, novels about crime tend to be published than about other aspects of society, this doesn't negate the fact that some very excellent writing indeed is produced about the left-handed side of human endeavour. (1)

Melvin clearly sees the linkage between the study of popular literary forms and the new and developing discipline called the Sociology of Literature, which Swingewood and Laurenson's seminal book of the same name explores so intelligently. (2) He might also have noted that mystery fiction can claim other distinguished practitioners like William Godwin (Caleb Williams [1794]), Mary Shelley (Frankenstein [1816]), James Fenimore Cooper (The Last of the Mohicans [1826]), "Mark Twain"; ("Tom Sawyer Detective" [1876] and Pudd'nhead Wilson [1894]), not to mention R L Stevenson (The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde [1886] and The Wrong Box [1888]), Henry James (The Turn of the Screw [1898]), Joseph Conrad ("The Secret Sharer" and The Secret Agent [1907]) and other descendants like Somerset Maugham (the Ashenden spy stories), G K Chesterton (the metaphysical thriller The Man Who Was Thursday [1908] and the Father Brown detective stories) and Graham Greene (Brighton Rock [1938]). Nor must we ignore the contrib-
ution made by Georges Simenon, or forget the criminal low-life aspect in writers like Honoré de Balzac and Émile Zola and the "pot-boiler" fiction (cf. *The Grand Babylon Hotel* [1902] and *The Loot of Cities* [1905]) written by Arnold Bennett.

Literary paternity aside, where do we search for the basic causes of this intriguing dismissal of popular culture? Matthew Arnold must be tabled as a contending culprit; for example, his ringing words and phrases in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), such as his denigration of the literature read by the Philistines (Ch.1 "Sweetness and Light"). Arnold makes the point that "ordinary popular literature" is an example of the kind of "intellectual food" which many people consider suitable and "proper for the actual condition of the masses". We can fruitfully ask, is the rejection of such presumed "pulp literature" by academics attributable to this Arnoldian view of its Philistine qualities and its less savoury connections with the "Populace"?

Another eminent Victorian (to use Strachey's dubious phrase) partially responsible for inculcating literary snobbery is Thomas Carlyle. I refer not to Carlyle's satirical attack on "Fashionable Novels" in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34) on that occasion his detestation
was only a minor factor in the turbulent vortex of his own social and philosophical design. In Past and Present (1843) Carlyle attributes to literature a major role in the regeneration of consciousness in the social domain:

> Literature, when noble, is not easy; but only when ignoble. Literature too is a quarrel, an internecine duel, with the whole World of Darkness without one and within one... (4)

This recalls Carlyle's earlier ridicule of trivial "Theories of Taste" in "Signs of the Times" (1829) and his lack of tolerance for any popular writings which, in their banality, merely divert people's attention from metaphysical and social realities.

Carlyle urged that we should "look only to the regions of the [literary] upper air; to such literature as can be said to have some attempt towards truth in it" (6), and in his long essay "Dr Francia" (1843) he bemoaned the "reading-corps, who read merely to escape from themselves". (7) Even Cardinal Newman had sufficient space in his lectures on The Idea of a University (1852) to draw special attention to the harmful (or at least wasteful) business of popular reading. In the Preface to The Idea, Newman writes trenchantly:

> An intellectual man, as the world now conceives of him, is one who is full of "views" on all subjects of philosophy, on all matters of the day. It is almost thought a disgrace not to have a view at a moment's notice on any question from the Personal Advent to the Cholera or Mesmerism. This is owing in great measure to the necessities of periodical
literature, now so much in request...(8)

John Ruskin, likewise, deprecated light (or "trivial") reading, dividing literature into "the books of the hour, and the books of all time...It is a distinction of species." Ruskin allows books of the hour their place,

But we make the worst possible use, if we allow them to usurp the place of the books: for, strictly speaking, they are not books at all, but merely letters or newspapers in good print.

Then follows a devastating piece of Ruskiniana:

"The newspaper may be entirely proper at breakfast time, but assuredly it is not reading for all day"! 9

One need not disagree with Ruskin or Newman's strictures about the regular reading of popular writing, but the academic issue concerns the value of studying such literature for insight into predominant cultural values in particular eras. What is immensely surprising is that while Marx and Engels enjoyed great writing (e.g., Shakespeare, Balzac, Tolstoy), yet they could not see the instrumental value of studying and/or demythologizing popular genres. After Engels had read Carlyle's Past and Present he wrote that "all fashionable literature revolves in an eternal circle and is just as tedious and sterile as the jaded and hollow fashionable society."

Peter Demetz adds: "More consistent than Carlyle, Engels ascribed a definite class character to fashionable literature." 10 But instead of perceiving this fact to be a possible source of worthwhile investigation,
Edmund Wilson jubilantly crows that Marx and Engels "could ridicule a trashy writer like Eugène Sue for what they regarded as his petit bourgeois remedies for the miseries of contemporary society (The Holy Family)."¹¹ Demetz shows implicitly how precipitate such a judgement was: for although he too considers Sue's work as "trash" with "a moving operatic finale", Demetz remarks that "Sue significantly changed the nature of the Gothic monster" and that, "In principle, the modern social novel as well as the detective story owe much to him".¹²

+ + + + +

II

Julian Symons, an English crime writer whose study of the broad realm of mystery fiction (Bloody Murder, London: Faber, 1972) Ngaio Marsh suggests "is and should remain, the final word"¹³ on the subject, remarked in an earlier publication that it is well known that detective stories "are a favoured form of reading among British politicians and clerics (the compliment is ambiguous) as an agreeable relaxation from the cares of life."¹⁴ Leslie Fiedler, the American critic, finds it appropriate to scorn the fact that "the detective story which has by our time become hopelessly compromised by middle-brow condescension" is now "an affectation of Presidents and college professors."¹⁵ Symons, in his later book, details this
dubious combination of detective fiction with men of power. He mentions the fact that Abraham Lincoln and Joseph Stalin admired the work of Edgar Allan Poe, and Dilys Winn has reprinted Lincoln's own "The Trailor Murder Mystery" (1846) and gives the facts behind President Roosevelt's attempt at a mystery novel in her large "Mystery Reader's Companion". Howard Haycraft describes Woodrow Wilson as "an ardent devotee of puzzle and crime fiction" and devotes an entire chapter (Ch.XV) of his Murder for Pleasure to the consideration of "Dictators, Democrats, and Detectives." Symons adds that:

Stanley Baldwin greatly enjoyed The Leavenworth Case and John F Kennedy is supposed to have preferred Ian Fleming to any other writer of his kind. (16)

Symons also finds it noteworthy that Sigmund Freud liked the work of Dorothy Sayers, and readers of Time Magazine learned recently that another Germanic eminence, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, "occasionally relaxes with a mystery story, preferably by Agatha Christie." (19)

As an index of how great a change this kind of circumstance marks, let us recall with Margaret Dalziel that "escapism" was likewise a primary ingredient with the early "Penny Dreadfuls":

This was what the poor needed, escape into a world of exciting activity, of vice and crime, of love and suffering. (20)

...For however silly, sometimes even vicious, the penny periodicals of the mid-nineteenth century
may have been, they must have brought a stirring of the imagination, a sense of release, to people whose lives were often more wretched than we can easily imagine. There is something repulsive in the priggish and self-righteous attacks made by their more privileged contemporaries on one of the few pleasures of the poor. (21)

The early formalistic New Critics can be said to have taken this kind of attitude towards popular or mass factions, and Edmund Wilson, though not a formalist, sums up their charges in these self-flattering words at the close of his "The Historical Interpretation of Literature":

The relief that brings the sense of power, and, with the sense of power, joy, is the positive emotion which tells us that we have encountered a first-rate piece of literature. But stay! you may at this point warn: are not people often solaced and exhilarated by literature of the trashiest kind? They are crude and limited people to certainly feel some such emotion in connection with work that is limited and crude. (22)

Wilson (in The New Yorker, October 14, 1944) took the matter further and asked "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" Wilson noted, "I am always being reminded that the most serious public figures of our time, from Woodrow Wilson to W B Yeats, have been addicts of this form of fiction" yet he dissents from T S Eliot in deciding that "As a department of imaginative writing, it looks to me completely dead." In his famous essay on Dickens ("Dickens: The Two Scrooges"), Wilson contends that in Bleak House Dickens created,

the detective story which is also a social fable. It is a genre which has lapsed since Dickens. The detective story - though Dickens' friend Wilkie
Collins preserved a certain amount of social satire - has dropped out the Dickensian social content; and the continuators of the social novel have dropped the detective story. (24)

Thus Wilson believed flatly that "the detective story proper" had reached its zenith by the end of the nineteenth century! However, he does present a cogent hypothesis with which to explain the Golden Age of the detective story - that is to say, in the period between the First and Second World Wars. Dorothy Sayers had written in 1930 that the popularity of the pure puzzle mystery story could be explained as "the product of a period of emotional exhaustion. Religion, morals and sentiment are at the moment in difficulties, and the mind does not readily turn to them for refreshment after the business of the day." (25)

Wilson puts it this way:

The world during those years was ridden by an all-pervasive feeling of guilt and by a fear of impending disaster which it seemed hopeless to try to avert because it never seemed conclusively possible to pin down the responsibility. Who had committed the original crime and who was going to commit the next one?... Everybody is suspected in turn, and the streets are full of lurking agents whose allegiances we cannot know. Nobody seems guiltless, nobody seems safe; and then, suddenly, the murderer is spotted, and - relief! - he is not, after all, a person like you or me. He is a villain...and he has been caught by an infallible Power, the supercilious and omniscient detective, who knows exactly where to fix the guilt. (26)

We shall return to this point later, but the essential point which is so often missed is that popularity, as J B Priestly has written, "proves nothing, one way or the
Terrible plays and films have been popular but Shakespeare has pleased more crowds than they ever have. For several decades after his death, Dickens was dismissed as a mere popular novelist...by critical opinion of course, not by the public; and now later critical opinion has decided that Dickens is one of the greatest novelists of his or any other time. So my advice is - don't take popularity into account; there are too many traps along that path; try some other and surer approach. (27)

Dorothy Sayers took a similar view, noting very perceptively that before last century, "the theatre provided the only ground on which the educated and the popular could meet for the satisfaction of their common emotions. The minor Elizabethan drama, with its ghosts and revenges and its hecatombs of piled corpses, was the equivalent of the modern sensation novel, and it found its man of genius in William Shakespeare." Eric Bentley would appear to agree with this verdict, for he suggests very firmly that drama can be considered, "being in general a more violent phenomenon than the novel " as an "extension of the range of scandal". Bentley adds:

Why does even a bad description of violent actions please us? How could it fail to? We tend to feel our lives are lacking in violence, and we like to see what we are missing. We tend to be bored, and we like to be caught up in someone else's excitement. We are aggressive, and we enjoy watching aggression. (29)

Thus, Sayers defends the style of quality mystery writing in that such good novelists "have wedded the great phrase to the melodramatic story, and felt no more shame in the
matter than did Aeschylus or Webster".  

I A Richards began the trend of considering a decline in the merit of popular culture, although he did admit it to be "perhaps premature to envisage a collapse of values, a transvaluation by which popular taste replaces trained discrimination". Richards does not fear that people's behaviour is altered by the impact of popular products; the problem is that,

They tend instead to develop stock attitudes and stereotyped ideas: attitudes and ideas which can be "put across" quickly through a medium that lends itself to crude rather than sensitive handling. Even a good dramatist's work will tend to be coarser than that of a novelist of equal ability. (32)

It is this matter which engages the attention of Marcus Cunliffe. He declares the "truthfulness" even of popular fictions ("Best-sellers...may tell us things of some value - usually things the author was not trying to convey - about the approved or concealed appetites and aversions of their day"), but warns (and it is worth quoting at length):

The easy explanation, then, is that popular forms cater to anxieties, generally in a superficial or calculated way. The implication of this contrast between highbrow and lowbrow is between work written for its own sake, and work produced on commission: between something created and something manufactured. One might add that our hypothetical truth-teller is distinguished by his feeling for language... The run-of-the-mill writer, on the other hand, is often merely fluent. At his worst his prose is simply wordage. A bad popular book, sanctioned a few years after publication, seems
like a poorly staged puppet show - all jerks and gangling threads. Even a competent best-seller tends to go stale before long. If so, this may be because it is basically insincere or inauthentic. (33)

So runs the academic stereotype.

Yet Cunliffe sees that this "highbrow - lowbrow" contrast (Van Wyck Brooks) "is much too neat"34 and the categories "hopelessly artificial".35

Q D Leavis exemplifies the harshness of the orthodox view, and she wrote unashamedly in Fiction and the Reading Public (1932) of the best-seller (a title appropriate to Dame Ngaio's fictions) as "an exhibition of herd prejudice".36 In such fervent diction Mrs Leavis betrays the manifest inadequacies of her own "anthropological" approach ("examining all the material that seemed to bear on this question in an unbiased but inquisitive frame of mind"37). After self-consciously and nervously referring to intimidating Book Guild dismissals of "highbrow" pretention, Leavis looks with disapproval upon "commercialised novel-writing, so that famous authors of best-sellers are run as limited companies with a factory called 'Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc' or 'Elinor Glyn Ltd'"38 (There can be no saving graces for Dame Ngaio Marsh in this viewpoint, now with her own "Ngaio Marsh Limited"!) Mrs Leavis is concerned at the maladjustment which unrestricted phantasizing may induce,
and for this she squarely blames the press ("if for the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress are substituted the News of the World and the Sunday Express, it will be evident that popular taste is likely to be in some danger"). This recalls Jane's comment, in John Fowles' David Martin (1977), that "I've come to regard TV and Fleet Street liberalism as the nastiest right-wing conspiracy yet."

While Margaret Dalziel disputes with Q D Leavis regarding the supposed decline in taste, she finds herself admitting to considerable disquiet with respect to the treatment of violence and the scornful "attitude to female virtue" found in modern popular fiction.

Professor Dalziel (unlike I A Richards) believes that fearful consequences will accrue from these changes, for she acknowledges that her argument "depends on the belief that literature influences what we are, and that the influence is most powerful when the reader is intellectually unsophisticated."

To return these general considerations back within the orbit of a study of Ngaio Marsh, it must be emphasized very strongly that Dalziel operated on a very limited definition of popular culture in her historical survey. Such a definition excludes from consideration all quality detective fiction, within which category the novels of Ngaio Marsh
surely have a secure niche.

Here is Dalziel's interpretation:

By popular literature we understand here the books and magazines that are read purely for pleasure by people to whom pleasure is incompatible with the expenditure of intellectual or emotional effort. ...Standards do not seem to have changed at the top of the scale; popular literature of the better kind, whether cheap or not, seems to appeal by the same means and to the same kind of reader at both periods (largely by not asking us to make any intellectual or imaginative effort as we read).(43)

Likewise, Victor Neuburg prefaces his highly illuminating and detailed analysis (Popular Literature [1977]) of the development of mass entertainment from the advent of printing until the end of the nineteenth century with the proviso that "At its simplest, popular literature can be defined as what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure". The severe limitations of this definition are very apparent, and it is virtually inapplicable to nearly all "genteel" and orthodox detective fiction (as distinct from thrillers and crime novels of a more general variety). Even Mrs Leavis was aware that the social orders now "forming the backbone of the detective-story public are those who in the last century would have been the guardians of the public conscience, in the matter of mental self-indulgence". Writing a couple of years earlier, Dorothy Sayers made the point that good mystery fiction is read no longer in back-kitchens but,
rather in Downing Street, and in Bloomsbury studios, in bishops' palaces, and in the libraries of eminent scientists. The mystery story is indeed becoming more and more high-brow in its appeal, more subtle, literary and dedicated in manner. It is in great danger of losing touch with the common man, and in becoming a caviare banquet for the cultured. (46)

And in a radio interview recorded in New Zealand in 1947, Ngaio Marsh (no doubt unwittingly) echoed these sentiments when drawing attention to the fact that there was at that point no falling off in the popularity of detective fiction from a sales point of view. Marsh added that,

the type of reader appears to grow if anything rather more than less "highbrow". This in itself, of course, may be an ominous sign. (47)

Howard Haycraft well described the "new-style detective story" which the writing of both Sayers and Marsh superbly exemplify: such stories are "more natural, more plausible, more closely related to real life than the old-style - and are generally better written. The author is more careful to play fair with his readers... The detectives are less eccentric and more human, less omniscient and more fallible." (48)

To return briefly to the point where we left Margaret Dalziel with respect to violence and feminine virtue, we must divide detective fiction between the "Tough" detective action thriller (e.g., Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Edgar Wallace et al.) and the "genteel" detective mystery
Energetic feminists, not surprisingly, reject the exploitative attitudes toward sex in the former kind of fiction. Germaine Greer has registered a very forceful and accurate protest at what (referring to Ian Fleming's Bond stories) she calls the portrayal of a "tribe of deep-chested, full-breasted, narrow-hipped, dancer-legged anti-herdines". One simply has to quote more of this:

> We are not far from those extraordinary women with slanting eyes and swirling clouds of hair who prowl through thriller comics on the balls of their feet, wheeling suddenly upon the hero, talons unsheathed for the kill... Adventure-sex is a matter of pyrotechnics, explosives, wild animals, deep-sea diving, rough riding. (49)

Another prominent feminist, Kate Millett, lets it slip in her extraordinary autobiography that she finds some solace in an Agatha Christie novel which in terms of "tough-guy" fiction presents a more humane attitude to sexual values. As Richard Hoggart dryly notes, the "hard-boiled" detective "displays, at suitable moments, the fashionable streak of soft sentiment: his manners, his brutality, his sexual code, his general attitude to experience, are all those of an exhibitionist delinquent"!

Julian Symons has written that "the writers of the Golden Age showed an astonishing prudishness" about sex - the "most potent motive for crime". Somerton Maugham had a different explanation for this sexual diffidence,
and it was basically that where jealousy and "crimes of passion" occurred, "the ulterior motive was financial...It looks then as though the most plausible motives for murder that the detective-story writer can use are money, fear and revenge". Maugham adds (as a reader of hundreds of detective stories):

Murder is a horrible thing and the murderer takes a great risk. It is hard to make your reader believe that he will take it because the girl he has given her affection to somebody else or because a colleague in a bank has been promoted over his head. The stakes he plays for must be high. The author's business is to persuade you that they are worth playing for.(53)

Lest we be tempted to Maugham's scepticism to the bewilderment of a homosexual writer, Colin Wilcox has written much more recently that "it's difficult to concoct a motive for murder that seems believable".

In the end, most of us opt for murder for gain, or murder to conceal some terrible secret. Lately, however, our society condemns so little that it seems silly to have the villain commit murder to conceal, say, an extra-marital affair, or an inconvenient pregnancy. On the other hand, the profit motive continues to rage unabated.(54)

Symons has a more profound point to make in regard to the treatment of sexuality in Gold Age detective novels (a category into which Ngaio Marsh's stories just fall). He gives the example of Dashiell Hammett, on introducing Ellery Queen to a lecture audience, pointedly asking, "Mr Queen, will you be good enough to explain your famous character's sex life, if any?" Symons writes:
Such a question could not have been asked before the Second World War. Holmes could then be accepted as a misogynist, Poirot as an ageing bachelor, Queen as a figure susceptible to feminine beauty but above or outside emotional entanglement, but with the acceptance during the fifties and sixties of the fact that everybody has some kind of real and/or fantasy sex life, such easy answers would no longer do... Without going into more details, it is clear that Hammett's question showed up sharply the totally mythical nature of the Great Detective. (55)

This statement has considerable implications for the writings of Dame Ngaio Marsh, and these shall be examined in due course.

Disgust at sexual conservatism or crude stereotyping is not the cause of Janet Frame's undisguised contempt for detective novels. Frame seems concerned (rather like Q D Leavis) at the diversionary power of detective novels which enfeeble the personality, as implied in the stark image of Bob Withers in *Owls Do Cry* (1957):

Bob was slumped asleep with his detective novel fallen on the floor and his mouth open, dirty and dark red, like a drain. (Ch.24)

Frame uses the detective novel again in the sad Christmas scene (Ch.26) when we find Bob "reading his detective book" complaining about a radio choir interrupting his concentration! In the more recent *Daughter Buffalo* (1972), Frame uses the image of a man, confronted with his daughter's tragically early death, listening to a detective play, "Inspector Scott of Scotland Yard, The Case of the Nabob of Blackmere" (!), and added scorn is registered in these
We listened until the murderer was caught and the last ritualistic sentence uttered: "Take him away". (Ch.9)

Even René Wellek and Austin Warren have tentatively suggested that "sub-literary literature", though commonly thought of "as sheer 'escape' and 'amusement'", may have other functions, such as registering a search for knowledge and clarification. Wellek and Warren recognize that the question "has to be answered in terms of sub-literary readers", which is true enough when considering "pulp literature" but not when assessing classical detective fiction. To this fact they offer no solution.

One by no means "sub-literary" reader much enamoured with detective stories was the American expatriate writer and self-proclaimed genius, Gertrude Stein. As she wrote in her essay "Why I Like Detective Stories" (1937), "anybody knows that the only detective stories that anybody can read are written by Edgar [Wallace]". Stein notes that "there is the detection but nobody really believes in detection"; it is not the ultimate reason why we read such stories (if we do at all). Stein very sensibly relates mystery novels to our own intimations of the uncertainties of everyday life:

I like detecting there are so many things to detect, why did somebody say what they said, why did somebody
Stein writes of her own unorthodox attempt at a detective story, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor,* in which "there was no corpse and the detecting was general" and the story had no end! However, Ngaio Marsh has noted that corpses are not mandatory—"Many of Sherlock Holmes' tales, if I remember correctly, have no corpse. Nor has Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*."

Stein prefers Wallace because he "quite rightly uses the old melodrama machinery" of hero, heroine and villain, and she deliberately contrasts this with the classic form ("the Sherlock Holmes kind" of detective story). Stein does not like "the Sherlock Holmes super-detective" where the crime and criminal are "nothing but something for the unreal hero to conquer". Her reason?

In the melodrama, the three are equal, the villain, the hero and the heroine, in this order as to importance but nevertheless they all three have the right to be but in the detective hero type the rest of it becomes too dependent and eventually the hero detective having really to exist all by himself ceases to exist at all. (60)

This is extraordinarily perceptive: for Stein's notion that in classical detective fiction criminal and detective are unequal antagonists, by definition, is an accurate expose of a major limitation of that form.

In her lecture "What Are Master-Pieces and Why Are There
So Few Of Them" (1936), Stein argues that master-pieces are only created when "one has no identity". She then rather surprisingly refers to the detective story as "you might say the only really modern novel form" in that it gets rid of human nature "by having the man dead to begin with... and so you have so to speak got rid of the event before the book begins".

Vladimir Nabokov is another great writer fascinated by the detective novel, and Alfred Appel, Jun. writes that, Nabokov has often transmuted or parodied the forms, techniques, and themes of the detective story, as in Despair, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Lolita, and, less directly, in The Eye, where Nabokov says, "The texture of the tale mimics that of detective fiction". The reader of Lolita is invited to wend his way through a labyrinth of clues in order to solve the mystery of Quilty's identity, which in part makes Lolita a "tale of ratiocination", to use Poe's phrase.(63)

Nabokov liked reading Edgar Allan Poe when young (we recall that Poe invented the detective story) and his Father (V D Nabokov), Andrew Field tells us,"knew personally" Arthur Conan Doyle, whose works are now well known to his son. Nabokov uses an Agatha Christie title, A Murder is Announced (1950), for a thematic reason (to announce Clare Quilty's) in Lolita, and Nabokov showed a firm awareness of the technical issues involved in detective writing when he wrote that,

Old rigid rules must be followed by the pornographer in order to have his patient feel the same security of satisfaction as, for example, fans of detective
stories feel - stories where, if you do not watch out, the real murderer may turn out to be, to the fan's disgust, artistic originality (who for instance would want a detective story without a single dialogue in it?). (65)

(i) The Artistic Status of Detective Fiction

T.S. Eliot, whose connections with Formalist critics like I.A. Richards are well known, came to realize that it is naive to ignore the popular dimension of general culture. Eliot was disturbed at the parochial nature of the English reading public, reading far more from contemporary writers than from those of the past. In his essay "Religion and Literature" (1936) Eliot observed;

I incline to come to the alarming conclusion that it is just the literature that we read for "amusement", or "purely for pleasure" that may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us. Hence it is that the influence of popular novelists, and of popular plays of contemporary life, requires to be scrutinized most closely. And it is chiefly contemporary literature that the majority of people ever read in this attitude of "purely for pleasure", of pure passivity. (66)

Eliot relates this concern to the very real problem of secularism as viewed from the vantage-point of Christian values. He advises that we learn (as had I.A. Richards on utterly different ethical premises!) to know what we "ought to like", and clearly believed that literature does reinforce and even mould the consciousness of the mass in a mediat-dominated society.
The notion of crime-story readers as "addicts" has attained a great deal of currency. Edmund Wilson, in a second attack on detective fiction based on what he calls "my old crime-story depression", comes to the final conclusion "that the reading of detective stories is simply a kind of vice that, for silliness and minor harmfulness, ranks somewhere between smoking and crossword puzzles". Wilson states trenchantly that,

Detective-story readers feel guilty, they are habitually on the defensive, and all their talk about "well-written" mysteries is simply an excuse for their vice, like the reasons that the alcoholic can always produce for a drink. (67)

This recalls Gertrude Stein's plaintive plea for more detective stories:

They say that there are an awful lot of detective stories written but really there are really not, if you want to read one a day well not one a day but one every other day, say three a week and if you are willing to read over and over a lot of them even then there are not enough to go around if you include English and American ones, really there are not I can say in all sincerity that there are not. (59)

Wilson notes that many such readers never care about "who-dunnit", and Stein's re-reading of old stories would support this assertion. What they search for is, he suggests, "merely to get the mild stimulation of the succession of unexpected incidents and of the suspense itself of looking forward to learning a sensational secret". (68)

One reader that wanted to reap the "rewards" of such divertissements was Bertrand Russell, who claimed, "I have
to read a detective book a day to drug myself against the nuclear threat".  

W H Auden wrote that for him "the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol". Auden speaks in terms of a craving so that "if I have any work to do I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it". Auden states that it is the irrational "hold" which such stories induce that convinces him that, "in my case at least, detective stories have nothing to do with works of art".

P G Wodehouse (an ardent fan of detective fiction, including that of Ngaio Marsh) wrote a light spoof on the folly of such an addiction, entitled "Strychnine in the Soup". Mr Mulliner meets a man who feels that by losing a mystery novel he has done worse than losing a friend. This reminds Mulliner of his nephew Cyril who wooed a woman on the strength of having once met Dorothy Sayers and managed to blackmail her menacing mother, Lady Bassett, by confiscating her Horatio Slingsby mystery story until she relented! Wodehouse writes mock-seriously that "no poet has yet treated of the most poignant bereavement of all - that of the man half-way through a detective-story who finds himself at bedtime without the book". He adds in a similar vein that, Horatio Slingsby was an author who could be relied on to keep faith with his public. He was not the sort of man to fob the reader off in the next chapter with the statement that what had made Inspector Mould
look horrified was the fact that he had suddenly remembered that he had forgotten all about the letter his wife had given him to post. If looking through cellar doors disturbed a Slingsby detective, it was because a dismembered corpse lay there, or at least a severed hand. (73)

This strange statement about the restrictive conventions of mystery writing (viz. the expectation of gratuitous horror) leads us to the problem: "What is the artistic status of the detective story?" Two other popular satirical writers, Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, wrote the memorable Tony Hancock script, "The Missing Page". (1960) The pretentiousness and literary confusion portrayed in this episode makes it a certain classic of its kind. Hancock has entered a municipal library and, on finding out that Lolita is unavailable, proceeds to take out Darcy Sarto's Lady Don't Fall Backwards. This produces the celebrated exchange with Sid:

Tony: I read thrillers purely as relaxation between the heavy stuff. I find fifty pages of Dead Dames Don't Talk the perfect hors d'oeuvre to an all night bash at Bertrand Russell.

Sid: Bertrand Russell, didn't he write Kiss the Blood Off My Hands?

Tony: Kiss the Blood Off My Hands! Bertie of all people. Of course he didn't. That's not his style at all. You're thinking of Aldous Huxley. (74)

It is doubtless this kind of philistinism and ignorance which led Edmund Wilson into his intemperate crusade, which ended with his chilling invocation to the Elect ("Friends, we represent a minority, but literature is on our side") and the remark that "With so many fine books to be read, so much to be studied and known, there is no need to bore
ourselves with this rubbish."75

The factor perhaps most in the detective story's favour to Dorothy Sayers (and to Gertrude Stein as we have seen) is the air of mystery which it celebrates:

What gives a mystery story that authentic stamp of permanency which we call classical quality? The touch-stone, I think, is in the word mystery itself. Does the book, or does it not, strike that interior note of essential mysteriousness which is part of the nature of things?..If the glamour be there not to remind us of the ineluctable mystery of things, then the whole superstructure of clue and false clue is artificial and lifeless. The great writers of mystery stories have all, in their different ways, this touch of the eternal.(76)

What we might call the "detectival temper" (i.e., this idea of our existence as a mystery, with the consequent enjoyment of gaining partial solutions to some of our and problems) is intimately related to everyday life/is underscored by the search for criminal clues in the Watergate saga. One of David Frost's researchers for the "Nixon - Frost TV Interviews", John Birt, reminded his fellows that

"You can't judge a debate on policy by the same standards you apply to a whodunnit, which I suppose is what parts of Watergate are".77 It is also decidedly ironic that one of Nixon's junior henchmen, E Howard Hunt, a man with former CIA links, for many years wrote "tough-guy" thrillers (e.g., Lovers are Losers, I Came to Kill, From Cuba, With Love and, most richly, Washington Payoff!) under the
pseudonyms of "Robert Dietrich", "Gordon Davis" and several other names. Life is truly stranger than fiction.

The same sort of thing has been treated by two recent detective novelists. Margaret Doody (who is an Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkley) has published an historical detective novel, Aristotle Detective (1978), which as the title implies considers the great philosopher as a criminal investigator of an amateur (but exceedingly thorough) kind. Aristotle tells Stephanos (whose innocent nephew has been charged with the murder of a prominent Athenian patrician) that "the human animal exerts itself through the work of the mind - this is the best and most effective remedy against evil that mortals are given. Let your mind now enter the game." This is a classic statement of the Great Detective, and Aristotle (like his successors) lists "three types of rational desire": Wrath, Fear and Covetousness, with crimes of sexual passion nowhere to be seen. Aristotle repeats that detection "is a game of a kind", and it is remarked that he loves small, trifling details and enjoys puzzles. Doody takes up the point which Aristotle made in chapter IV of the Poetics, where he wrote that "there are some things that distress us when we see them in reality, but the most accurate representations of these same things we view with pleasure - as, for example, the forms of the
most despised animals and corpses." Stephanos finds himself inexplicably rushing to the scene of the murder:

I do not know how long I looked at this sight like one entranced. I felt slightly sick, but not inclined to go away. (82)

This relates to the catharsis clause of the Poetics, as I A Richards has written:

Pity, the impulse to approach, and Terror, the impulse to retreat, are brought in Tragedy to a reconciliation which they find nowhere else, and with them who knows what other allied groups of equally discordant impulses. Their union in an ordered single response is the catharsis by which Tragedy is recognised, whether Aristotle meant anything of this kind or not. (83)

Professor Elliot L Gilbert, writing on "The Detective as Metaphor in the Nineteenth Century" (1967), mentions Hamlet and Oedipus as detective figures:

Like Hamlet, Oedipus is also well-suited to the role of detective. He has gained his throne by solving the riddle of the Sphinx, and he is therefore highly qualified to investigate the murder of Laius. But once again the mind is no match for the horror; indeed, by a grim irony, it is the very act of investigation, the very application of reason, which brings on the tragedy. (84)

Gilbert goes on to quote Stanley Edgar Hyman's statement that Sigmund Freud was a "great detective" (The Tangled Bank; New York, 1962) - we also remember Freud's enjoyment of Sayer's novels. Nicholas Meyer, an up-and-coming writer with a splendid gift for parody, wrote a novel, The Seven Per Cent Solution (1974), which is basically a rewrite of Watson's account of Holmes' doom at the
hands of Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls (cf. XXIV "The Adventure of the Final Problem" [1893]). Written in a suitably Watsonian style, Meyer chronicles Holmes' journey to Vienna (ostensibly on the trail of Moriarty), where he eventually finds treatment from Sigmund Freud for cocaine addiction. Freud makes Holmes admit that his contest with Moriarty was forged by Holmes' confrontation with his own rational fallibility ("the only time Professor Moriarty truly occupied the role of my evil genius was when it took him three weeks to make clear to me the mysteries of elementary calculus"85). After both men solve another mystery, Freud hypnotizes Holmes to discover that the latter's energy for justice was grounded in the fact that his father killed his mother.86 After this startling admission, Watson can only tell Freud, "You are the greatest detective of all". Freud replies:

"I am not a detective". Freud shook his head, smiling his sad, wise smile. "I am a physician whose province is the troubled mind." It occurred to me that the difference was not great.(87)

Meyer lists many similarities between the aims and methods of the two men88, but his greatest single insight was to destroy the myth of the purely dry, soulless detective, remote from the life of the emotions. Like Doody's Aristotle, Holmes states that his method "is founded upon the observance of trifles,"89 and Watson observes that Holmes was often motivated by "a purely animal lust for the chase", so that "Men who had only known the quiet
thinker and logician of Baker Street would have failed to recognise him."  

Lastly, Holmes declares to Watson that very often it is the "simple cases which are so extremely difficult". Singularity is almost invariably a clue. The more featureless and commonplace a crime is, the more difficult is it to bring it home. (91) 

(Cf. the debt to Poe - "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" [1842].) Need one insist upon Freud's similar statement that, 

The simplest explanation is not always the correct one; the truth is often no simple matter, and before deciding in favour of such a far-reaching hypothesis we should like to have taken every precaution, (92) 

and place it alongside Holmes' credo "It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data", in order to admit the justice of Meyer's conception? 

It seems incontestable that a major reason for hostility to crime fiction on the part of the academic establishment ultimately derives from the legacy of flesh-creeping, blood-and-thunder "Penny Dreadfuls", with their oddly-assorted parade of protagonists like Deadwood Dick, Dick Turpin and the Blue Dwarf, Johnathan Wild (a derivative of Fielding's) and, of course, Sweeney Todd the demon barber of Fleet Street.  

Added to this one could add the
sensationalism of the *Newgate Calendar*, all of which testifies to what Ngaio Marsh very succinctly describes as "the underlying morbidity of Victorian literary taste".  

A E Murch, whose masterly *The Development of the Detective Novel* predates and is a more scholarly treatment than Symons' *Bloody Murder*, discusses popular English melodramas "with detective interest in their plots", and names John Baldwin Buckstone's *Presumptive Evidence: or Murder Will Out* (Adelphi Theatre, 1828) and Tom Taylor's *The Ticket of Leave Man* (The Olympic, 1863) as notable examples.

Murch is quick to place the "Dreadfuls" in the realm of crime fiction and defines the detective story, as a tale in which the primary interest lies in the methodical discovery by rational ideas, of the exact circumstances of a mysterious event or series of events. The story is designed to arouse the reader's curiosity by a puzzling problem which usually, though not always, concerns a crime.

Murch writes that we must separate the detective story and thriller forms; as Julian Symons puts it so memorably, "A detective story asks questions about Who, Why and When; a thriller, dealing also in violent matters, simply tells us How". Francis Nevins Jr argues "that the central ritual of detective fiction is the process whereby the inexplicable, the absurd, the nightmarish are fused by the power of human intelligence into a rationally harmonious
mosaic". Professor Donald Yates adds that such stories are "prose narratives that deal primarily with detectives whose principal activity is to detect". 100

Dorothy Sayers wrote in 1928 that the detective story "possesses an Aristotelian perfection of beginning, middle and end"; that it has "the rounded (though limited) perfection of a triolet... It does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement". Sayers saw that "It does not show us the inner workings of the murderer's mind - it must not; for the identity of the murderer is hidden until the end of the book". 101 Sayers added that there is a difficulty in allowing real human character into detective stories because,

At some point or other, either their emotions make hay of the detective interest, or the detective interest gets hold of them and makes their emotions look like pasteboard. It is, of course, a fact that we all adopt a detached attitude towards "a good murder" in the newspaper. Like Betteredge in The Moonstone, we get "detective fever", and forget the victim in the fun of tracking the criminal. (102)

In 1930 A G Macdonell wrote an essay in The London Mercury in which he stated that the detective in such fiction should have character because the guests at the proverbial House-Party "must not have individual characters". 103 Macdonell's thesis is that the mystery writer is limited by his conventions; "He must be master of a puppet-show, not
a creator of human beings". Macdonell adds that the murderer "may be a nebulous phantom, pallid, hardly discernible... But he must be able to construct a brilliant alibi". What of Macdonell's stricture that "At no point is the author a free man. He is hampered and hindered by the exigencies of the book"? One can only reply that he did not reckon on the ingenuity and perception of Margery Allingham, whose "talents are really on display" in her Death of a Ghost (1934) and Ngaio Marsh, who published her first venture in detection, A Man Lay Dead, also in 1934. Julian Symons notes that both writers share the distinctive quality of viewing "the social scene with a gently ironic eye".

Dame Ngaio frequently resists the common notion that her novels should be considered in the straight "classical" detective mode (for example, her publishers used to quote a Sun comment that she is "The finest writer in English of the pure, classical puzzle whodunnit"). Marsh considers that one can divide detective fiction into two streams. In the "Classic" form (Poe, Gaboriau, Conan Doyle, Austin Freeman, John Rhode, Freeman Wills-Crofts and, most superbly, Agatha Christie) we have a pure puzzle story where plot is pre-eminent and characterization secondary, and in silhouette form. The second stream she considers as the Detective Novel and it could be dubbed the "depth of characterization
school" (with practitioners like Sayers, Allingham, Michael Innes and, although she does not say so, she hopes herself). Dame Ngaio speaks of her own works as "hybrids - not a pure form at all"\(^{107}\) and this seems a fair judgement. Marsh states that she feels she is introducing a crime element into a more or less ordinary novel, and said on a radio interview, "I don't know how I fell into the habit of detective fiction. I'm sure it just happened".\(^{108}\) Dame Ngaio maintains that although there are limitations in detective fiction, it can be like any other form of novel. It can be as good as the writer is. It doesn't limit one's style - it doesn't make one write down at all. The real limitation is that in the strict "classic" form there's one character that the author is not completely frank about - that, of course, is "whodunnit". And that is the limitation - you may say it makes it a second-rate form because it doesn't completely explore this theme.\(^{109}\)

In an interview broadcast in 1954, Marsh made the point that she goes about her writing in what, when compared to her peers of the genre, is "a very unusual and odd way". Normally, crime writers think of a plot idea (a mechanism of crime) then find the people who will fit into that particular situation, whereas for Marsh a person enters her mind; that suggests other characters and she then has to face the dreadful chore of constructing a suitable plot with all of its associated pieces of "teckery". She styled herself then as one of those detective writers who "try to
write in the third dimension". While she acknowledges that "I do not attempt a Dostoievskian probe which, supposing I was capable of it, would be inappropriate to the restricted form of the detective novel", Marsh is quick to add that "I do however feel that I must believe the character in question capable of the crime in question and that I must know why". In short, Marsh's murderers must be more than Macdonell's "phantoms".

Marsh replies to those who define her kind of fiction as "escapist" that,

I think they are right. I don't think one should claim more from the form than it is intended to provide. But at the same time and within their own field, these books can be brilliantly written as, for example, Innes' Hamlet, Revenge!, learned, witty and/or poignant. In their classic form they are subject to one restriction - the need to dandle the reader. This means that the author is devious and - if you like - dishonest and it is this element that restricts the classic whodunnit to a lower drawer in the literary tail-boy.

Marsh uses the example of P.G. Wodehouse, "an 'escapist' writer if ever there was one, who comands a superb style. He wrote, re-wrote, polished and purified his prose and is accepted as a master in his own genre and within his own limitations".

Here is Marsh's most exhaustive public summary of the distinctions, and it is also implicitly her own apologia:

In its very early stages the genre split into two streams, the first the two-dimensional classic
form with Conan Doyle, Edgar Allen Poe and Gaboriau among its founders. The second is three-dimensional. Here the puzzle element is retained, but the author now seeks to present his characters in the round and the style is, or purports to be, sophisticated. This is the "impure" form. Impure because, while the author can be honest, penetrating and exhaustive about all the character except one, he is obliged to be devious and misleading in his handling of that one - the guilty person. It is this flaw, I think, that sets three-dimensional detective writing, however brilliant, in a minor category. In all other respects it is a form that can command our aesthetic approval. It is, by its nature, shapely. It must have a beginning, a middle and an end. The middle must be an extension of the beginning and the end must be implicit in both. The writing is as good as the author can make it: nervous, taut, balanced and economic. Descriptive passages are vivid and explicit. The author is not self-indulgent. If he commands a good style, there is every reason for maintaining it. In an age of immensely long and undisciplined novels we can do with some shapely ones and in the midst of much pretentious obscurity a touch of lucidity is not unwelcome. (112)

Ngaio Marsh thus defends her own excursion into detective fiction, but she admitted in a TV interview in 1966 that "I would have like to have written a serious novel very much indeed, but I've always been stopped by the feeling that it might be just another reasonably good long novel. I'm afraid that I didn't want to do. I would rather write detective fiction efficiently than write a long novel merely efficiently if you see what I mean". 113 Marsh expanded upon this in 1978 in greater detail:

I think probably if I hadn't been so deeply concerned in the theatre I would have tried to do something of the sort. But I had a dread of writing just another interminable novel. I went all through the days of those interminable American novels where the author begins until he's got nothing more to say and then stops. (She refers to Allan Drury's Advise and
Consent, Hervey Allen's Anthony Adverse (1933) and Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (1936). It just goes on and on - there's no economy in the writing at all. I didn't want to write like that, I didn't want to turn out a New Zealand novel of immense length.

Pressed further, Marsh admits, "I'm not sure I would write it well enough to satisfy myself. I ought to try perhaps, but I don't know that I will". We can remind those who condemn her for putting so much talent and energy into such a limited genre of publisher Mark Goulden's struggles with Janet Frame's own multiple variations upon a single dominating theme. Marsh's own verdict is that in her Pacific Moana Quarterly article she used "Graham Greene's 'entertainments' deliberately because they are entertainments. I have a horror of being pompous about them [her novels]. I'll defend them to the last ditch because I think you can write as well as you are able in that form, otherwise I wouldn't write them". Dame Ngaio's statement of priority followed:

My main aim is always to write as well as I can. That comes by a long way first, and the fact that they are cast in that form is secondary.

It is, therefore, a mutual compliment to both authors when Michael Demarest writes in Time Magazine of P D James as "a worthy successor" to Ngaio Marsh (among others like Sayers and Allingham), and there can be no doubt that Marsh does not, unlike Sinclair Lewis, fit into Gertrude Stein's definition of "the typical newspaperman" (or, vide
Q.D. Leavis, "the journalist of fiction";¹¹⁷

The difference between a thinker and a newspaperman is that a thinker enters right into things, a newspaperman is superficial. (¹¹⁸)

We recall that Symons has given credit to Marsh and Allingham for their stylistic "ease and elegance"; that "both were prepared to investigate the psychology of their characters, and also to provide a background which was seen with a most agreeably satirical eye".¹¹⁹

To return to the basic notion of plot, the novelist C P (Lord) Snow reviewed Marsh's Grave Mistake as another of "her delectable detective stories" in line with the classical type as "one of the most elegant of artificial literary forms".¹²⁰ It is undeniable that Marsh's writing should be labelled "minor art" in terms of Somerset Maugham's definition (where to him "great art" enriches the soul and enlarges the personality).¹²¹ Maugham, however, does not deride minor art (many say that he was a creator of it) and he criticizes the English distrust of form in art:

They find in it a sort of airlessness; its constraint irks them; they feel that when the author has fixed upon his material a wilful shape, life has slipped through his fingers. The French critic demands that a piece of fiction should have a beginning, a middle, and an end; a theme that is clearly developed to a logical conclusion; and that it should tell you all that is of moment to the point at issue. (¹²²)

Maugham laments the fact that the notion of a 'story' "has been despised by the sophisticated", and he gives a very
crisp definition of plot ("merely the pattern on which the story is arranged"\textsuperscript{123}). Maugham attributes "the vogue of the detective novel" (specifically in terms of the 'thirties but valid for all eras) to this primitive delight in storytelling, and he notes that very often "the novelist thinks with his story".\textsuperscript{124} Schlegel likewise influenced Poe regarding plot, and we recall the former's vivid dictum that "The Universe is the plot of God".

Jacques Barzun has written of "Detection and the Literary Art" (1956) and he makes the point that the detective story is a tale par excellence; that it implies "an art of symmetry" and, "like classical tragedy it cherishes the unity of place - the locked room, the ship or train in motion".\textsuperscript{125} The analogy with tragedy recalls Aristotle's Poetics, and indeed this kind of stress on plot we have already heard echoed in the writing of Sayers and Marsh. F L Lucas has very economically described the Aristotelian imperative:

A "beginning" is a situation which has definite consequences, though not very obvious causes; a "middle" is a situation with both causes and consequences; and an "end" is the result of the "middle", but creates no further situation in its turn. (126)

It is apparent how neatly this formula fits the detective story, with its tripartite division along the lines of: i) initial Catastrophe; ii) frustrating Complic-
Barzun is an Aristotelian in that he argues that "detection rightly keeps character subordinate. But detection makes up for this neglect by giving intelligence a place which it has in no other literary form." 127 This recalls Aristotle's famous words (Poetics, VI) on the primacy of plot; that it is the end of tragedy. "Furthermore, without action tragedy would be impossible, but without character it would still be possible". 128 That Barzun is a Genre Critic is confirmed when we consider the three Aristotelian categories of "recognition" (i) recognition of inanimate things; ii) of events; iii) and of persons) and how well they mesh with what happens in detective fiction. Hardison notes in his commentary on anagnorisis that,

The typical detective story provides examples of "simple" recognitions; as, for example, when the identity of the criminal is revealed by the discovery of his fingerprints at the scene of the crime. (129)

Other theorists concerned with detective fiction see in it an embodiment of the kind of literature which makes for the creative engagement of readers with authors. Georges Poulet, the existentialist philosopher-critic and
exponent of the Geneva school of critique de la conscience criticism, writes of the way in which readers are "taken over" by the controlling emphases of texts (and, by implication, of their authors) - "I am on loan to another" he states. Poulet argues that this phenomenon "appears in its most obvious and even naívest form in the sort of spell brought about by certain cheap kinds of reading, such as thrillers, of which I say 'It gripped me'."130 Here is one possible reason for the addictive qualities which some people (not this writer) find in detective stories.

Wolfgang Iser takes a dynamic and somewhat startling view that,

The work is more than the text, for the text only takes on life when it is realized... The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence.(131)

For Iser, one can veritably state that "No text is an island, entire of itself", because it requires readers (as Poulet had said) to animate and "influence the effect of the written part of the text".132 Iser speaks commonsense when he asserts that "no author worth his salt will ever attempt to set the whole picture before his reader's eyes" and that,

it is only by activating the reader's imagination that the author can hope to involve him and so realize the intentions of his text.(133)

Leslie Fiedler calls for a "Death-of-Art" criticism
which will "be less serious, more frivolous, a form of entertainment".

The reborn novel, the truly New Novel must be anti-art as well as anti-serious. But this means, after all, that it must become more like what it was in the beginning, more what it seemed when Samuel Richardson could not be taken quite seriously, and what it remained in England (as opposed to France, for instance) until Henry James had justified himself as an artist against such self-declared "entertainers" as Charles Dickens and Robert Louis Stevenson: popular, not quite reputable, a little dangerous.(134)

Fiedler believes that the novel must now close the gap between élite and mass culture; he refers to Boris Vian's detective novel, I Will Spit on Your Grave, as a prototypical New Novel, but is saddened that Vian used the nom de guerre, "Vernon Sullivan". Fiedler also approves of Faulkner's "self-styled 'pot-boiler', Sanctuary" but sees more hope in the Western, in that it has preserved "our mythological innocence". This accords with Ricard Hoggart's informed plea that we begin to recognize "the meaningfulness of much popular art". David Bleich has also made the revolutionary point that,

The act of taste is first understood as a declaration of personal preference: the previously implicit statement of any value judgement - "I like this" - is made public.(138)

Furthermore, Bleich considers levels of taste, not impersonally engendered by the social pressures exerted by portentously "cultivated" clusters of persons (a la Schücking), but as "intersubjectively renegotiated when they are proposed anew". Bleich declares that a significant element of
subjective criticism is the organized study of taste-formation and, as with Structuralist analyses, this promotes a "democratic" approach to the content of literary studies.

If taste is understood as an expression of subjectivity, its cultivation depends, first, on identifying it as fully as possible and then, on testing it on works that may not be "great" in the eyes of either Leavis or Freud. (140)

Lastly, Structuralist theoreticians like Roland Barthes find the detective story an excellent vehicle for the analysis of primitive syntagmatic (i.e., linear, "horizontal") narrative, all inspired by Vladimir Propp's classic formalist analysis, The Morphology of the Folktale, which Alan Dundes suggests "should be useful in analyzing the structure of literary forms (such as novels and plays), comic strips, motion-picture and television plots, and the like." Detective novels fall down to Fiedler, and this may be because, in Barthes' distinction, they are readerly (leaving readers as passive receptors) rather than self-reflexive meta-fictions (the writerly or scriptable). Be that as it may, Schlegov has produced a transformational theory "Towards a description of detective story structure" (1975), and the formalist Shklovsky has written of literary realignment, in that literature periodically redraws its own boundaries. As Terence Hawkes puts it, "sub-literary or 'junior' genres such as journalism, vaudeville, the detective story, find aspects of themselves drawn into the 'canon' of official
literature".144

With the extension of the parameters of detective fiction exemplified by the work of Meyer (see also his The West End Horrors [1976]), Doody, Tim Heald, P D James, John Ball (especially In the Heat of the Night [1965], an excellent treatment of racial issues in the form of a "Southern Novel"), Julian Symons, Kathleen Tynan (The Agatha Christie Mystery [1978]), and the development of parody forms like Neil Simon's witty send-up of "tough-guy" detective stories, The Cheap Detective (1978), the chances that this will occur are very high.

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ii) Detective Stories as Social Documents

"Literature, we may say, must in some sense always be an historical study, for literature is an historical art". So wrote Lionel Trilling in The Liberal Imagination.145 Northrop Frye argues that "Literature is rooted in the social attitudes of its time"146, and he has spoken (like Shklovsky) of the fact that "Literature" contains within itself a system of transformation. Frye adds that popular literature tells us where the ascendant conventions of the next century are going to come from, in that popular forms
occur when literary conventions wear out. Yet Frye is (or at least always has been) contemptuous of "demotic" (popular, lower rank) literary forms; in his classic essay "The Archetypes of Literature" Frye explicitly stated that we all share the feeling that "the study of mediocre works of art, however energetic, obstinately remains a random and peripheral form of critical experience, whereas the profound masterpiece seems to draw us to a point at which we can see an enormous number of converging patterns of significance." Frye later willingly conceded that,

The detective story begins in the Sherlock Holmes period as an intensification of low mimetic, in the sharpening of attention to details that makes the dullest and most neglected trivia of daily living leap into mysterious and fateful significance. (149)

Frye tells us that by "low mimetic" he refers to "most comedy and of realistic fiction", and in a later article he remarks of folktales that it is they which truly belong to romance; Frye calls them "simply abstract story-patterns" that "illustrate essential principles of storytelling". Frye then turns to the thriller but even here he finds "incident for its own sake";

Gone is all sense of the leisurely acquiring of incidental experience, of exploring all facets of a character, of learning something about a specific society. (151)

Bearing in mind Frye's earlier statement about detective fiction's mimetic value, we feel sure that he will follow
the logic of his own position, yet Frye disappointingly talks about the "subordination of character to linear action" in detective fiction (he cannot have read Innes, Marsh or Allingham) and skirts the issue of documentary value.152

Somerset Maugham has maintained that "if posterity wants to know what the world of today was like it will not be to those writers whose idiosyncrasy has impressed our contemporaries, but to the mediocre ones whose ordinariness has allowed them to describe their surroundings with a greater faithfulness".153 Maugham later added:

It may well be that when the historians of literature come to discourse upon the fiction produced by the English-speaking peoples in the first half of the twentieth century, they will pass somewhat lightly over the compositions of the "serious" novelists and turn their attention to the immense and varied achievements of the detective writers.(154)

This makes sense: the detective novel is essentially a twentieth century phenomenon and it could well turn out to be a major contributor to our era's literary epitaph. G K Chesterton said as much when he declared that the "first essential value" of detective fiction lies in the fact that it was "the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life".155

Richard Hoggart has argued in his essay "Literature
and Society" (1966) that "literature provides in its own right a form of distinctive knowledge about society", while Symons echoes Maugham in stating that detective stories are "likely to have considerable significance for future sociologists trying to interpret the nature of twentieth century man".

Colin Watson agrees with this judgement, for in his engaging study The Snobbery of Violence (1971), Watson declares that detective fiction "has a thorough-going objectivity" about cultural phenomena, and writes of its realistic documentary qualities. Indeed, his whole book proceeds on the viability of this assumption. Watson's discussion of the Yellow Peril (or how orientals were enlisted as part of the melodramatic apparatus in the role of villains) in his ninth chapter and his treatment of the attitudes to servants in detective fiction are very penetrating. It was Margaret Dalziel who stated that "Popular Literature is deeply conservative" and who observed that this literature (last century at least) "takes for granted the existence of a society marked by fairly rigid differences of class, differences based on birth and wealth". Then the differences as a source for conflict are ignored and "servants, as a species tend...to be either idealized or depreciated as a class".

Likewise, Watson attributes the "obsessive preoccupa-
tion with the top layer of the class structure" in detective stories to anxiety.

People who thought of themselves as middle-class believed that they had nothing to gain from social change and a great many things to lose... Not even in the great days of Victorian certitude has the "lower orders" been treated with such contempt as they received between demobilization after the first world war and the requirement of new levies for the second... It is almost impossible to find a crime novel of the Golden Age period in which opportunity is not taken to make fun of "common" ways of talking. Even Freeman Wills Crofts, one of the least spiteful, felt constrained occasionally to use the outrageous pseudo-Cockney that thriller writers had evolved as a standard mode of indicating working class speech.(162)

Watson's analysis of Bunter, the Jeeves-like butler to Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey (as "a sort of priest, charged with the maintenance of ritual and ornament which reflect the immutability of the social structure") is brilliantly handled.

We must at this point pause to consider whether detective fiction exists as romance or realism. Such fiction does not fall quite obviously into Lukács' despised positivistic naturalism (Flaubert, Zola) nor under "decadent" and subjective formalism (Kafka, Musil, Joyce, Beckett). Alan Swingewood notes that Lukács criticized the documentary conception of the novel as reductionist.164 Howard Haycraft reminds us that realism is,

one of the prime requirements of the form: the semblance, at least, of plausibility. ("A sense of verisimilitude is essential to the detective novel". - Willard Huntingdon Wright)(165)

Jacques Barzun explains that in modern detective fiction
"objects are taken literally and seriously" and he refers to a balance between rationalism and romanticism - "detection is par excellence the romance of reason".  

In detection details are numberous and must be instantly convincing. We are ready to swallow long descriptions of houses and their furnishings, we are greedy for the contents of posthumous pockets, we long to master time tables, speeds of vehicles, and procedures for collecting evidence... (167)

If, as Barzun suggests, this form consists of an admixture of romance and rationality (employing a sober realism), and if we accept Frye's definition of romance as representing an "idealized world", in what consists the idealization?

Swingewood has emphasized his belief that,  

Literature, because it delineates man's anxieties, hopes, and aspirations, is perhaps one of the most effective sociological barometers of the human response to social forces. (168)

Again, what social forces does detective fiction attest to? Indeed, can detective fiction give us an accurate social witness? Professor William Aydelotte argues strongly that "One would hardly go to the detective story for an accurate picture of modern life". Aydelotte suggests that any future historian would reach "strange conclusions" about our society from such fiction, such as:

He would probably infer that the most prominent features of our culture were inefficient or corrupt police forces, a multitude of private detectives, sometimes urbane and sometimes hard-boiled, and a constant series of domestic crimes occurring principally in large country houses and committed exclusively by people of the most harmless and respectable outward appearance.(169)

Aydelotte, however, deems such stories "an impression portent
of our cultures"; they overwhelmingly present an agreeable, secure and reassuring view of life, in which

Troubles are objectively caused by an external circumstance, the murder, which can and will be resolved, whereupon the troubles will disappear. Once the solution has been reached, most of the other difficulties are ended and the characters go away happy, never apparently to be vexed by the minor worries and neuroses of modern man. (171)

Aydelotte deals with the despair and horror and shows that the message "is essentially agreeable, almost to the point of being saccharine". He remarks of the detective as a self-confident deity figure, and looks at this fiction in that its historical value "is that it describes day-dreams" which may illuminate motivations behind larger historical events.173

Richard Hoggart found in his study of mass literacy that in all "spicy" crime magazines "the prevailing note" is that "Crime Doesn't Pay".

They are likely to have sub-titles such as, "Published in the Cause of the Reduction of Crime". Whatever the formal professions, the interest and excitement remain all with the gangster, or the detectives are temperamentally gangsters who chance to be on the side of the law. (174)

There is no such ambivalence in orthodox detective fiction, as P D James intimated with her novel Unnatural Causes (1967), in which James writes of the ultimate irony: the murder-mystery author (in this case a "Maurice Seton") who is murdered in real life! Seton's novelistic method is described by a character in the novel:
"But he kept to familiar characters and settings. You know the kind of thing. Cosy English village or small town scene. Local characters moving on the chess board strictly according to rank and station. The comforting illusion that violence is exceptional, that all policemen are honest, that the English class system hasn't changed in the last twenty years and that murderers aren't gentlemen". (175)

Truly, Seton is a victim of his own illusions, and those illusions alluded to above form a representative summary of the major assumptions of "classical" detective fiction. In 1966 Agatha Christie, for instance, admitted that when she re-read her early books she was "amazed at the number of servants drifting about. And nobody is really doing any work, they're always having tea on the lawn". 176 Colin Watson has written memorably on the social smugness of the genre; that the "classic" authors all asserted a "personal faith in the stability and moral health of their society". 177

Howard Haycraft's celebrated view was that "there could be no detective stories (and there were none) until there were detectives. This did not occur until the nineteenth century". 178 Erik Routley has qualified this by adding that what was needed above all was "a tradition of integrity in the police force", 179 before which all previous interest in Robin Hood types and other picaresque rogues would wane. Routley mentions Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn as a "good policeman" archetype, and he adds that she has "winningly" romanticized the police with him. 180
Routley's study proceeds from the premise that detective stories attract an essentially "puritan" audience (whether they be secular or religious puritans). Although he does not say so explicitly, it seems logical that a primary reason for this is connected with a hankering for law and order: for the legalism and retributive impulse lurking in the puritanism of the middle class. Routley writes of the argument that "detective stories are reactionary":

They rely on the acceptance of assumptions about law and order, about the rights of property, about the sanctity of human life, and about the propriety of the punishment of wrongdoers, which should be allowed to change, or perhaps should at once be changed. That is, anyhow, the argument. And naturally it comes from those who do not regard an established social order as self-evidently beneficial. (181)

Exactly. Routley admits that there is one major liability in such fiction, and that is "the preoccupation of detective writers with the affluent and the literate, and their assumption that what happens to such people is interesting, whereas what happens to people in the lower ranges of society would not be worth writing about". Routley also notes that one reason why the detective genre appealed to the middle class is because it "is not really a middle class story in its essence". Routley's closing thoughts on the matter underline the fact that "Detective stories don't go with permissiveness; they go with convention and style and dogma and assurance; they go with such assumptions as that a society in which authority is accepted, and correction
by wiser people of the unwise or the young is permitted, is a good society". That must assuredly be the final word on the subject.

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iii) A Social-Symbolic Function?

Tragedy is, then, an imitation of a noble and complete action, having the proper magnitude... (It) is presented in dramatic, not narrative form, and achieves, through the representation of pitiable and fearful incidents, the catharsis of such pitiable and fearful incidents.

- ARISTOTLE (184)

In addition to correcting economic injustice, may it not be necessary also to develop, systematically, socially harmless sources of excitation? Poker and bridge and pennant races and bowling alleys and detective stories may have more to do with our social stability than we think. Even today, an economically successful society may require circuses in some form, as well as bread.

- D O HEBB and W R THOMPSON
  ("Emotion and Society" [1954]). (185)

+ + + + + +
We return, inevitably, to Aristotle's powerfully influential (and contentious) discussion of catharsis as the avowed end of Tragedy. While it is certainly not my intention to compare detective fiction with tragedies (I shall outline my notion that detective stories exist in the tragi-comic mode in the following chapter), it is important to briefly raise the matter of catharsis in this context. In the eleventh chapter of the Poetics Aristotle makes it plain that "the incident of suffering results from destructive or painful action such as death on the stage, scenes of very great pain, the infliction of wounds, and the like". Hardison, Jr. comments that in Greek Katharsis can mean "clarification" as much as "purification" or "purification", adding that,

The prototype of tragedy is religious ritual; and the prototype of catharsis is the theophany, or joyous sense of rebirth and communion, that follows the sacrifice and rebirth of the god. (187)

Hardison writes that the purgative sense of the word led to the homeopathic interpretation so favoured by Freud, and which he believed to have been expressed in terms of the Oedipus complex in Oedipus and Hamlet. 188

It is this interpretation which Dr Janet Kennedy (Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York) seems to have in mind in her discussion of the social utility of detective and thriller fiction. In Kennedy's terms, in the crime
novel we can discharge our tensions and aggressions by identifying either with aggressors or victims.189

(R)eading, especially crime and detective fiction, is a perfectly socially acceptable method of channeling our aggressions and gratifying our fantasies, in a way that drinking or taking drugs is not.(190)

This may sound far-fetched, but it is quite possible that the reader almost enjoys learning that an objectionable character in a detective novel has been killed – as, for example, with the death of Luke Watchman in Ngaio Marsh's Death at the Bar (1939).

John Creasey, one of the most prolific authors of mystery fiction ever, has written that:

From the cradle to the grave, people are interested in the struggle between right and wrong – they have been since the beginnings of mankind. Crime books are the only books which deal with the subject exclusively. You can call them the morality plays of our day and age.(191)

Another writer of interesting fictions about Lieutenant Luis Mendoza, Elizabeth Linnington (or "Dell Shannon"), directly calls the detective story "the morality play of our time... it deals with basics; with truth versus lie, law and order versus anarchy, a moral code versus amorality".192 The same sort of claim has been made for the Western, as when Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel write of the tragic hero in the person of the sheriff, and they quote from Robert Warshow's classic essay "The Westerner" (in: The Immediate Experience) that "the westerner is the last gentleman".193 While we may well
debate this point and argue that it is the Roderick Alleyn types who should be regarded as the "last gentlemen", Leslie Fiedler makes the point that the American fictional detective (private-eye) "is the cowboy adapted to life on the city streets, the embodiment of innocence moving untouched through universal guilt".194

The poet laureate C Day Lewis (as "Nicholas Blake") looked into the guilt equation, connecting detective stories with the decline of religion at the close of the Victorian period, and he envisaged this type of fiction being called "the Folk-Myth of the Twentieth Century" by a future Frazer.195 Day Lewis saw detective fiction as a means of coping with guilt196 and W H Auden writes of the typical reader of this fiction as "a person who suffers from a sense of sin".197 Auden argues that cathartic notions of vicarious violence should be reserved for thrillers, because the magic of detective stories consists in "the illusion of being dissociated from the murderer".198

Routley dissents from the guilt theory, quoting Dr Charles Rycroft that the detective author,

"connives with the reader's need to deny his guilt by providing him with ready-made fantasies in which the compulsive question 'whodunnit' is always answered by a self-exonerating 'Not I'".199

The ultimate danger which Routley sees in such fiction is the promotion of the idea "that moralism - judging right
and wrong in others with no doubts about one's own rightness — is a legitimate and sufficient way of life." Therefore, while such stories appear to accept the working of sin in the world (jealousy, hatred, fratricide), they are finally sin-denying, letting complacent readers off the moral and metaphysical hook as it were.

Auden sums all this up in his insistence that in detective fiction what is required is an apparently "innocent society in a state of grace" where "there is no need of the law" — in short, an Eden. Auden uses the analogy of the detectival Quest with that for the Holy Grail, yet this must surely be qualified. The quest in detective fiction is for the particular, for ephemeral truth rooted in our historicity in the ordinary social continuum. It does not involve any searching for "Truth" in a deeper philosophical or theological sense. The hunt is seductive, but it is Justice as a legalized and formal goal which provides the momentum for the chase. Thus, the comparison with the Medieval Morality is misplaced for no schema of redemption is envisaged in these diverting fictions.

Yes, detective literature is indeed an "escapist" literary form, but it may attempt to afford us sufficient detachment and release from the urgencies of the day-to-day in order to look anew at our values and our outlook upon
l'condition humaine. By no means all such fiction can be fairly condemned as ignoble.
CHAPTER THREE:
DEADBEATS,
DETECTIVES
AND
DEVIANCE.
The difficulty for the writer who stayed at home was to achieve imaginative integrity... It is not surprising that a number of minor talents with only their talents and a desire to write to sustain them were tempted into poses and pretensions - attitudinizing, sentimentality, trick endings, whimsy, fantasy: Ngaio Marsh and M H Holcroft (in their early writing) were not immune.

-W H PEARSON
(The Recognition of Reality'[1964]).

The vagueness of Bill Pearson's categorization of Ngaio Marsh's writing is irritating if not insulting. If by "early writing" Pearson refers to Marsh's first few detective novels, then he has totally failed to grasp the fact that Ngaio Marsh possesses what Carl Jung called the gift of "active phantasy" (Psychological Types [London, 1923], p.69) and he has omitted to make clear whether or not by the term "fantasy" he means imaginative insight, Coleridge's "fancy" or simply escapist delusions. Furthermore, Pearson must not realize that detective fiction, by virtue of its own rather eccentric didactic design, assumes the right to "attitudinize". If Pearson rejects the fact of the artificiality of this specialized branch of modern fiction, he (and his kind) need to recall Algernon Moncrieff's subtle aphorism that "The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!" (The Importance of Being Earnest [1895], First Act.)
What irks many orthodox literary critics about Marsh's fictions is that she relies on them totally for her income. Dorothy Sayers once made the sensible remark that "We have become accustomed...to seeing an author insist at the same time upon his artistic purpose and upon his royalties". This was written about the time when Ngaio Marsh began to think of writing detective fiction as an exercise in craft.

Somerset Maugham later wrote:

It is fitting now that I should tell the reader something about literary composition which, so far as I know, the critics, whose duty it doubtless is to guide and instruct him, have neglected to apprise him. The writer has in him the urge to create, but he has, besides, the desire to place before the reader the result of his labour and the desire (a harmless one with which the reader is not concerned) to earn his bread and butter. On the whole he finds it possible to direct his creative faculty into the channels that will enable him to satisfy these modest aims. At the risk of shocking the reader who thinks the writer's inspiration should be uninfluenced by practical considerations, I must further tell him that writers quite naturally find themselves impelled to write the sort of things for which there is a demand. That is not surprising, for they are not only writers, they are also readers, and, as such, members of the public subject to the prevalent climate of opinion. In short, when Dame Ngaio began her career in literary detection, the detective novel was literally "in vogue" and it was a genre attracting some quite significant talent. Even more recently the fine detective writer "P D James" (Phyllis White) stated that she considers detective fiction a "very disciplined form of writing" and that she can comfortably express her own ideas on the human condition within such an admittedly popular genre. In that radio interview of 1947, Marsh said:
I would hazard a guess...that as long as people are eager readers of murder trials in the papers, there will still be an audience for this queer, circumscribed and isolated form of fiction. On the other hand, it does seem possible that the entirely mechanical detective novel is yielding to the longer, more elaborate and less conventional plot. Michael Innes, Simenon and Margery Allingham can be produced in support of such a theory. After all, there's no clearly defined barrier structurally between Bleak House and Lament for a Maker, and though the essential element of withheld surprise is not present in Graham Greene's extraordinary tales of the underworld, they have a strong affinity with the works of a handful of modern detective writers.(5)

In the same interview (her most vintage on the radio archives)
Marsh noted that detective fiction was changing "markedly"; that two-dimensional puzzle "teckery" (à la Christie, for instance) is fading. Readers of the form,

now demand from their detective novelists a very much more solid affair. They want three-dimensional characters and psychological as well as intellectual problems. They demand a certain standard of writing and a certain depth of perception, I suppose, from the author.(5)

Another detective writer, John Dickson Carr (alias "Carter Dickson"), defends the integrity of three-dimensional detective fiction. Dickson Carr quotes Dr R Austin Freeman's wise dictum that it is not at all necessary to mislead the reader; he will mislead himself. Marsh qualifies this type of statement:

I try not to let myself worry too much about the concealment of the "whodunnit". You can just think yourself into a circle - if I say this will the reader think "Oh yes, she'll think I think that points to him"? - and you can go on in a vicious circle and become squint-eyed and dotty. It doesn't do - or I find it doesn't - to start thinking like that. I try to be as honest as I possibly can about the culpable person. There are fringe things you can do - to say something that is perfectly true but which the reader will put the wrong interpretation upon is what really goes on... It's quite deliberat
One of the rare occasions in which an essential clue is withheld in Marsh's writing comes in *Death and the Dancing Footman* (1941), where Mrs Compline's letter is kept until near the very end of the novel (XV, V:255). But Dickson Carr's general defence remains valid:

> No speech in the [detective] book is included just because it sounds mysterious, or because it makes a given character look guilty, or because the author doesn't know what the devil his character does mean and simply throws in the words to fill up space. Not at all. In turning over the pages afterwards, the reader can see for himself - how rare it is! - just what each character was thinking at any moment.

> And the result?

That is why the story pulses with vitality all the way through, and springs into living vividness at the end. The veil is twitched away; the masks are removed. Human beings walk here, and not sawdust dolls, because the author has described voice inflections, shades of feeling, as well as Inspector Hogarth's discovery of the blunted thumb-tack under the sofa.

Ngaio Marsh has never felt any tension between her enjoyment of character-drawing and the demands of plot, and Carter Dickson's point about filling up space goes to the heart of the mystery writer's conventions. There is no room for mere padding; indeed, A G Macdonell remarked that "At no point is the detective author a free man. He is hampered and hindered by the exigencies of the book. From beginning to end his style is cramped, his material dictated, his character-drawing prevented, and the number of his pages laid down in advance". Does the prognosis have to be so bleak? Certainly there seems to be a norm regarding the
length of these fictions. Dame Ngaio states that she always aims to write a novel of some 70,000 words, and in paperbacks this averages out nearly always at 256 pages. (For Christie, the paperback average is usually around the 200 page mark.) Dorothy L Sayers showed far less concern with a standard regular length, but the more pertinent restriction comes with the wedding of writers to this form and to this form alone. Agatha Christie expressed this dilemma in an interview reported in The Daily Express in 1922:

Once a writer of detective stories and, though you may stray into the by-paths of poetry or psychology, you inevitably return - the public expect it of you.

Ngaio Marsh made the same point, but more vigorously, in 1954:

Once you write your first detective novel - let me warn all listeners - and get it published, you're absolutely sunk. You'll go on writing them until you're on crutches! You're sunk, you're a detective fiction-monger. If you want to write anything else, you will have to write it under another name.(9)

Christie did apply the latter strategy in writing six romantic novels under the name of "Mary Westmacott", and Sayers left the genre of detective fiction in the later 'thirties so as to write her momentous religious dramas, The Man Born to Be King (1941) and The Just Vengeance (1946), not to mention her other academic lectures, writing and projects like her translation of Dante's The Divine Comedy. As Marsh was so passionately absorbed in theatre she never ever managed to break with the detective novel since her accomplished début in 1934.
(i) Stylistic Excellence or "Unappetizing Sawdust"?

Miss Ngaio Marsh has attempted slightly less than Dorothy Sayers, and achieved, in detective writing, a great deal more. She is a specialist in this art, and her output has now spanned a whole generation. Less prolific than Agatha Christie, she resembles the older writer in having found her length early and having held it consistently. Every one of her detective tales is a novel, and from the beginning she shows a gift equal to that of Dorothy Sayers for communicating character.

- ERIK ROUTLEY. 10

Ngaio Marsh, the New Zealand writer with the name like a Zulu assegai or a Malay Kriss, finishes just out of the money in the feminine whodunnit derby, trailing Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie Mallowan, and Margery Allingham. She has neither Mrs Mallowan's flair of plot, nor the sheer personality which used to distinguish the earlier work of Peter Wimsey's creator; nor yet the clipped suggestiveness of Albert Campion's contriver. But she is really very good in her own way, which is rather closer to Margery Allingham's methods than to those of the others; and certain pages even wear the unmistakeable cachet of authority that marks the authentic Sherlockismus or the more plangent Thorndykeism.

- CHARLES A BRADY. 11

If all the previous talk about guilt and the socially useful value of crime fiction seems more than a trifle pretentious, there can be no argument about the fact that a key reason for the popularity of Dame Ngaio Marsh's novels lies in the sprightliness of her characterizations and her vigorous and elegant style.

Of the judgements by Routley and Brady, this writer would
side with that of the former. Routley is indisputably correct: Marsh shares with Sherlock Holmes the epithet of "specialist in crime" ("A Scandal in Bohemia"), and her output of 31 novels (with sales figures stubbornly undeclared) cannot match in sheer volume Dame Agatha Christie's 80 detective novels with over 300 million sales. Brady has mistaken the point about the personality of Ngaio Marsh's major detective for reasons that shall be provided, and an American reviewer of Colour Scheme, Dorothy Cameron Disney, wrote truthfully that "Ngaio Marsh has already proved that in her ironic and witty hands the mystery novel can be civilized literature" (New York Times Book Review 1943). Further, Professor Joan Stevens has gone on record to declare her firm belief that in writing and in characterization, "I claim ... Ngaio Marsh commends a very good style and is, to modify her own term, absolutely an artist in crime".12

Another significant quality of Marsh's writing is her splendid visual acuity; her own facility with the pictorial mode (with respect to both the landscape and human affairs) is translated directly into her fiction with a deceptive ease. This recalls the notion of "painterly effects" in fiction and Joseph Conrad's celebrated remark to his readers:

What I am trying to achieve by the power of the written word is to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, above all, to make you see (Preface, Nigger of the "Narcissus" [1897]).

Howard Haycraft located in Ngaio Marsh's novels "a level-
headed refusal to regard herself - or others - either too seriously or too negligibly". Haycraft added that, while Marsh's characterizations are "excellent", somehow "she is essentially more the novelist of manners than character, and in this respect she lies a little closer to the current American school than to the English". In this sense Ngaio Marsh's literary roots, regardless of the detectival connection, are to be found in the Edwardian period - one thinks of E M Forster's solid emphasis (in Passage to India and Howard's End for example) on the socio-moral world of manners and mores. Samuel Hynes has noted that "all but one of E M Forster's novels are Edwardian"14, and although Frank Swinnerton included Ngaio Marsh in his survey of The Georgian Literary Scene, her Edwardianism is pronounced. One of the first things readers learn about Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn is that he possesses, in the fluttering words of Rosamund Grant,

a distinguished presence and a cultured voice and what-not...in the Edwardian manner. He hectors me with such haute noblesse it is quite an honour to be tortured (AMLD IX:106).

Even as late as Tied Up in Tinsel (1972), Troy watches the guest at a country house and thinks of the work of "some Edwardian problem-painter: Orchardson or, better still, the Hon John Collier" (3,1:53). Later, Troy tries to understand a baffling combination of practical jokes which recalls an experience with the Ancreds (Final Curtain):

Should these elements, wondered Troy, who had been re-reading her Forster, connect? What would Rory think? He was fond of quoting Forster. "Only connect.
Only connect" (4, 3:91).

If we recall Virginia Woolf's stringent attack on those she perceived as the pre-modernist Edwardians (Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy), we can for the purpose of this argument leave aside Swinnerton's qualification that Bennett's and Wells' "real fame has been post-Edwardian". Woolf, in her essay "Modern Novels" (1919), decried these writers for their hard-headed materialism; for the fact "that they write of unimportant things" and that if writers described life as it is really lived, and ignored conventions,

there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it.(16)

Clearly, with Mrs Woolf's views on the tyranny of artificial form, detective fiction would be both damned and doomed.

Frank Swinnerton has mischievously (but in many ways accurately) summarized this kind of charge:

But all the same there was something juvenile in this plan, as if not very pleasant and nurse-bred children showed a familiar kind of ill-breeding. We saw the new little band of brothers and sisters crowding the windows and doorway of a first-class English railway carriage, and pretending that the carriage was reserved for them. "Full up, full up!" they cried, to Shaw and the other elderly and less elderly trippers. "Plenty of room for you in the old third-class, Edwardian, coach". Not very agreeable children; a good deal worried (like minor royalties) about precedence and congenital superiority.(17)

Swinnerton observes that, in his own view, "there can be no doubt that Agatha Christie is the queen of the [detective] craft,
with Josephine Tey and Ngaio Marsh in attendance". Edmund Wilson, predictably, wrote that Christie's "writing is of a mawkishness and banality which seem to me literally impossible to read". Wilson considered Christie's stories as involving puppets and "a sleight-of-hand trick". Even so sympathetic a critic as Julian Symons discusses the likelihood of Dame Agatha's literary survival but qualifies that this "is not to say that she was a great or even a good writer, but rather to say that although the detective story is ephemeral literature, the puzzle which it embodies has a permanent appeal". Symons adds:

If her work survives it will be because she was the supreme mistress of a magical skill that is a permanent, although often secret, concern of humanity: the construction and the solution of puzzles. (21)

How does Ngaio Marsh come off in the critical "sweepstakes"? In his later article, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" (1945), Edmund Wilson extended his tirade to the writing of Dorothy Sayers and Dame Ngaio Marsh. Wilson, having damned Sayers' classic The Nine Taylors (1934), writes that "she gives an impression of brilliant talent if we put her beside Miss Ngaio Marsh, whose Overture to Death was suggested by several correspondents". Wilson then adds:

I do not see how it is possible for anyone with a feeling for words to describe the unappetizing sawdust which Miss Marsh has poured into her pages as "excellent prose" or as prose at all except in the sense that distinguishes prose from verse. And here again the book is mostly padding. There is the notion that you could commit a murder by rigging up a gun in a piano in such a way that
the victim will shoot himself when he presses down the pedal, but this is embedded in the dialogue and doings of a lot of faked-up English county people who are even more tedious than those of The Nine Taylors.

(23)

The plain fact of the matter is that Marsh's modus operandi in Overture had a similar precedent in George Bagby's Murder at the Piano (Covici-Friede, 1935) which saw the introduction of his Inspector Schmidt, although doubtless Marsh was unaware of this at the time of writing. The very bulk of detective literature makes this kind of thing likely, and a similar situation could apply to Ngaio Marsh's Hand in Glove (1962), in that Rex Stout and M G Eberhart both published The Hand in the Glove respectively in 1937. (As a matter of interest, Eberhart's story was reviewed alongside Marsh's Vintage Murder in John O'London's Weekly, May 21, 1937).

When Wilson wrote of padding and fake dialogue he was on to something more cogent. Edmund Crispin, in pointing out to Harry Keating that Ngaio Marsh "is a better stylist" than Agatha Christie, had to remark that Marsh, can be very much duller, particularly in the middle of her books, with her detective Alleyn interviewing one suspect after another and getting nothing very relevant out of any of them. This can go on for a hundred pages or more and seems to me, personally, to be faulty construction, a fault almost completely absent from Agatha Christie... I think it would have bored her to have interview after interview, à la Marsh.(24)

Is this a fair appraisal? What about Dickson Carr's insistence that dialogue is never inserted "to fill up space"? It is
certainly true that in Swing, Brother, Swing (1949) it takes an inordinately long time for "G P F" to be conclusively unmasked when he could easily have been Manx, Rivera or Lord Pastern. Yet in Spinsters in Jeopardy (1953) there is pace and more overt action than dialogue; it may not be accidental that it was this novel which Marsh considered "her biggest departure from a straightout detective theme". Marsh once said of Spinsters:

It was away from the traditional Marsh books and the next thing I had a letter from a woman on the Riviera telling me she was furious that I had written a different kind of story. (26)

The most telling point is that it would appear that to Marsh there is no disharmony between characterization and the demands of plot because she accomplishes more characterization through dialogue than plot action. Somerset Maugham once quoted Dr Johnson's remark "that it is much more easy to form dialogues than to contrive adventures". Is this true for Marsh? What we must not overlook is the fact that, as Martin Esslin puts it, "Analyse any skilfully written play and you will find that invariably the characterisation is in the action". This fact should be allied with Haycraft's observation that:

It is doubtful if any other practitioner of the form to-day writes with so vivid a talent for picturization, so accurate a grasp of "timing", or so infallible a sense of dramatic situation. Many of the scenes in Marsh's novels could be transported bodily to the stage or screen without the mediation of the dramatist or scenarist. (13)

In Marsh's stories the one marked feature of her characters is that they talk, and talk well.
To return to the Agatha Christie connection, Dame Ngaio's name was first linked competitively to hers in the war years when her American publishers invented the slogan, "She has Dorothy Sayers and Agatha Christie wondering if their crowns are on straight". The latest stratagem on the part of Little, Brown has been to adopt the words of a recent New York Times review: "She writes better than Christie ever did; she is more civilized, knows something about the arts, and her characterizations have more life than Christie's..." This in many ways tactless remark is now used in much of Marsh's American advertising (although she had no say in the matter) and is now printed at the top of the covers of all new Jove paperback editions of her novels. Since Dame Agatha's death in 1976, it was inevitable that Christie-Marsh comparisons would be pressed further but what may have been overlooked is the fact that these two Crime Queens knew one another personally for a time. On one occasion the Lanes (of Penguin Books), who organized the Christie and Marsh millions, invited the Mallowans and Ngaio Marsh to dinner, and in 1960 both women appeared publicly together for a party at the Savoy Hotel, given for two academic writers of detective fiction, at which Prime Minister Macmillan was also present. Regarding the new publicity ("It's time to compare Agatha Christie to Marsh instead of the other way around") Marsh refers to it as "silly" because Christie was and is too well established for a challenger in her own kind of writing and because she so clearly wrote "in an entirely different way" from Marsh.29 Dame
Ngaio points out that Christie led the "classic" form and that their mutual agent (Edmund Cork) introduced Agatha and Ngaio to one another after a lecture given by Max Mallowan. Mrs Mallowan was very kind to Marsh and informed her that she had read several of, and indeed enjoyed, the new writer's novels. Neither author should be compared with the other for reasons entirely connected with their individual approaches to the crime craft.

+ + + + +

Just what is Ngaio Marsh's narrative strategy? Firstly, in all of her detective writings, Marsh uses the omniscient pattern of narration. Aside from what the psychologist may make of this tactic of writing from a standpoint of absolute certainty, it is only fair to remark that the limited "eye of God" style is a virtual convention in detective fiction, presumably because a first-person account invokes reader identification and a consequent loss of strict objectivity for an, at best, partial vision. This convention has become axiomatic ever since Agatha Christie's innovative The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926), where the narrating doctor turns out to have committed the murder in question!

Marsh takes up, in slight contradiction to this air of undisguised omniscience, the attitude of an objective human
chronicler who accompanies Alleyn et al. under the arrangement that "she" will write up their cases as accurately as possible. For example, Marsh has written that Alleyn and Fox "have been working together for a considerable time and still allow me to accompany them". This unusual stance was first announced in the wry "Foreword" to Ngaio Marsh's second novel, *Enter a Murderer* (1935), where she wrote of showing her manuscript account of the Unicorn Case "to my friend, Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn". In the opening preamble to this story, the narrator declares that one character "does not come into" the novel (EAM I:14) and in *Artists in Crime* (1938) it is clear that a selecting authorial presence is at work when it is noted that Mr McCully "rambled on" (AIC XVII:212), for readers are spared the ramble. This example enlightens Dickson Carr's comments on the essentiality of the dialogue presented, and in *Overture to Death* (1939) the author remarks that "for the first time in these records [Fox] broke into a loud laugh" (Twenty, IV:192). In *Final Curtain* (1947) comes a totally explicit authorial comment: "This story is concerned with Alleyn and Troy's reunion only in so far as it affected his attitude towards her account of the Ancreds" (9, II:136). Finally, several relevant points in this matter are made in *Black As He's Painted* (1974). As an example, the whole of Chapter Six ("Afternoon in the Capricorns"), and particularly section III, is conducted in a strongly, but editorially, omniscient manner. Section IV also shows evidence of itself as an account of past events and when Alleyn begins to feel certain
who is the villain of the piece, readers are (as so often)
treated to a frustrating, but formally necessary, piece of
authorial fiat:

Fox laid his broad palm across his short moustache and
then looked at it as if he expected it to have picked
up an impression.
"I see what you're getting at", he said, "I think".
"What I'm getting at", Alleyn said, "is - fairly
simply - this - " (Eight, II:173).

Cut! Section III take one, as it were.

An obvious feature of Marsh's writing is her superb sense
of design. In fact, it could be said that this "architectonic"
quality and an over-riding economy in her books are the twin
poles around which Dame Ngaio's fiction orbits. Another some-
what rare property in detective fiction is the memorability of
many of Marsh's stories, a fact which approximates to a
validating criterion.

Ngaio Marsh has observed that she partially shared in the
influence which John H E Schroder exerted whilst he was Editor
of the Christchurch Press Literary page. Schroder (1895- )
promoted what Marsh terms the writing of "good plain and explicit
English and avoiding pretentious words where simple and illumin-
atating forms would do. He was and is a purist". Can one say
this of Marsh? Doubtless Edmund Wilson picked on one of her
worst detective stories in choosing Overture to Death and there
is a degree of verbal "sawdust" in that novel (although Wilson
overstated his case as usual).
It is interesting that Troy tells Alleyn "you're the purist" (BHP Three, II:67) in matters of language, and as early as Enter a Murderer the untutored Inspector Fox deferred to his gallant superior after Alleyn made an allusion to Hamlet: "Shakespeare. I don't read that sort of thing myself" (EAM XXI:169). Clive Champion-Cheney noted in Maugham's drawing-room comedy The Circle (1921) that irony is "a rhetorical form not much favoured in this blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England". Then Champion-Cheney blasts Elizabeth in a manner quite worthy of Roderick Alleyn:

How slangy the young women of the present day are! I suppose the fact that Arnold is a purist leads you to the contrary extravagance (Act Two). (32)

Alleyn (like his maker) is something of an ironist; Marsh has described him as "a man of understatement who has an extreme dislike of pomposity". Yet, unlike him, his creator is not a purist proper.

Dickson Carr has discussed the weaknesses of English detective writing and he follows Somerset Maugham's clarion call that "Fine writing is here out of place... Nor do we want erudition". Dickson Carr's complaint is that "literary" 'tecs are "too often apt to mistake style for substance. It imagines that with good writing, which sometimes becomes merely pretentious writing, you can disguise the lack of an original plot".

"Come, now!" the author seems to be saying. "I'm really a straight novelist, you know, indulging in this funny little medium of the detective story because nowadays it's become respectable. It's true I haven't
got much of a mystery, or any very clear idea of how to handle it; but, if I give you strong characterizations and much talk-in-a-mist, you won't mind that?" (34)

There is no question that Ngaio Marsh scores highly from both demanding angles, good style and good plotting. However, although Dame Ngaio states that she prefers plainer prose (that of Dr Johnson, say, instead of Carlyle), there can be little dispute that she is not a straight purist in style. As an example, the opening page of Tied Up in Tinsel (1972) prompts us to ask if at times Marsh may over-write. In this single page reference is made to the Great Slump, Bond Street, King Farouk, Steptoe and Son, a Meissen bowl and to the words facezia and "chicanery" - an unlikely combination of dissimilars. Read in context, however, the verdict must be less unfavourable, for these are the words of a character.

Marsh's style is an admixture of crisp, pungent and robust prose with elegant (sometimes decorative?) and attenuated diction, occasionally verging on the florid. I have argued that Marsh as narrator uses what Wayne Booth would call an "artifical authority" (telling rather than showing on occasions), yet her novels are admirably symmetrical in form and finely orchestrated. Her style is characterized by a sly and urbanely unobtrusive vein of humour and all the books are pervaded by an economy of purpose. In Scales of Justice (1955), the opening description is repeated at the end of the novel (suggesting that there may be some redemption, from man's inhumanity to man, in the country-
side and in *False Scent* (1959) this Aristotelian symmetry is even more pronounced. Marsh's exceptional sense of form is illustrated in the parallelism between Chapters One, I and Eight, V where the end becomes congruent with the beginning of the novel: Mary Bellamy's real funeral is described in almost identical terms as her earlier expectations of day-dreaming vanity. Perhaps this accounts for the comment in the *New Statesman* that the book is "neatly contrived from start to finish".

Another example of the extreme proportion of this not exclusively realistic form of fiction is provided in *Grave Mistake* (1978) where, after her mother has been murdered, Prunella Foster becomes engaged to the son of a Greek magnate. This "happy ending" should occasion no surprise because detective novels provide resolutions which so rarely occur in everyday life. (It is not inappropriate that the airy Prue should, by holidaying on the Côte d'Azur, be exempt from the horror of her mother's exhumation.)

As regards her actual choice of words, Marsh shows evidence of her enjoyment of writers like Somerset Maugham (with his references, as in *Of Human Bondage*, to dyspepsia which likewise abound in Marsh's works\(^3\)) and Dickens (particularly in the regular use of descriptive words like "galvanic"), but most notably of Aldous Huxley, whose sparkling novels were the
favourite of both her father and Dame Ngaio. Crome Yellow (1921) pulses with small eccentric touches which Marsh has (perhaps without quite realizing it) echoed at divers times in her own idiosyncratic fictional products. For example, the adverb "pre-prandial" and reference to the Ancient Mariner (Ch.XXII), the former which is frequently used in novels with an upper-drawer orientation (e.g., Final Curtain :130), and in Surfeit of Lampreys (1940) Alleyn, as on other occasions, refers to the Mariner:

"The Ancient Mariner's idea was a sound one. In describing something unpleasant you get rid of part of its unpleasantness."
"Unpleasant! My God", [said Stephen Lamprey], "the skewer was jutting out of his eye and blood running down his face into his mouth. He made noises like an animal" (14,1:203).

Huxley (and, in a minor fashion, Marsh) lay in the Jonsonian satiric tradition, particularly as Denis Stone (the poetaster) expresses the prevailing idea:

The fabulists were right, he reflected, when they took beasts to illustrate the tractates of human morality. Animals resemble men with all the truthfulness of a caricature (Ch.XXIV).

This "doctrine" is elaborated in the quaint mannerisms of people, like the indomitable Mr Scogan who, in playing clairvoyant in a village fair, "had a terrifying way of shaking his head, frowning and clicking with his tongue" (Ch.XXVII). Several oddities in Marsh's novels make sundry assorted clicking noises and Mr Scogan's "sharp, claw-nailed forefinger" (ibid) finds a counterpart in Miss Truebody's "little claw" and her clucking noise (Spinsters in Jeopardy One, III:29). Also, Alleyn, with
characteristic dryness, describes police investigation in terms of ferreting: "We have to ferret, you know, like anything" (SOL 13, IV:191). Several of these Huxleyan particulars are displayed in the singular Mrs Hazel Rickerby-Carrick, for example, who makes a "catarrhal clicking sound" (COC 1, Two: 14) and is described (in Dickensian terms) as projecting a "loud, succulent and complacent sniff" (ibid., :14). Huxley's Mr Scogan uses Cockney expressions like "Lor!" and is described to speak "sepulchrally" (Ch.XXVII), both qualities which are applied to Inspector Fox. Another very recurrent adjective is "stertorous" which is one that John Sterling objected to in Carlyle's tortuous Sartor Resartus.36

Apart from literary allusions and an exquisite command of the French language too difficult to detail (cf. Swing, Brother, Swing and Spinsters in Jeopardy for example), Ngaio Marsh uses long and/or involved "circumlocutionary" words, like vomitorium (DIW :156), halitosis (SBS :178), choriambic (SIJ :15), uxorious (ibid :87), exigent (:120), meretricious, homeopathic (SOJ :56), purblind (ibid :96), extravasation (:134), cachinnation (OWH :10), charabancs (:17), bombasine, jocose, cadaveric (SIS :47.), megrim, animadversion (SIS: 150), potations (:174), and cynosure (FS :62), as selected examples. Admittedly, words like "homeopathic" have strict medical meanings, yet the use of these extended or erudite words points up the rather "highbrow" nature of Marsh's style.
A notable element in Marsh's works is her choice of odd names for characters. Listener writer Helen Paske put it this way:

She...has a weakness for exotic and musical names, Frede Lamprey and Anelida Lee, Martyn Tame and Terence Lynne (both girls), Fabian Losse and Aubyn Dale, Caley Bard and Cedric Ancred, Octarius Danberry-Phinn, Hazel Rickerby-Carrick and Ruby Dillington-Blick. "It's rather fun thinking of names", she says. "If they don't suit I can't do with them. I have to think of something that feels right".(37)

Marsh adds that she likes unusual names: "Of course, you would really be playing safe if you called everybody Mr Smith, Mr Jones or Mr Thompson, but you don't want to do that".6 Marsh's interest in people is paramount in her stories:

I always start with people. I have occasionally started with a plot idea. I did so in Scales of Justice which was based on a fact about fish scales which was given me by a member of the Royal Society [her solicitor, Michael Godby, MA (Oxon)] - he was an expert on that sort of thing. But far more often - almost always - I simply start a novel by thinking of a group of people and then I think, "Well now, which of these people is going to be capable of a crime of violence and what would turn him or her on?" Therefore I have got to have a setting and a situation that would do that, that would single out, as it were, this one character in a group. But it's the people I'm interested in much more than the plot - the plot is a chore to me... I'm quite sure I would save myself an awful lot of trouble if I were able to plot my books out to the last word first - I think Agatha Christie, for instance, did that, but I am simply unable to do it. I came nearest to doing it in a very successful book called Final Curtain. I did plot that out in much more detail and departed from it much less than I usually do. But I usually start with only the sketchiest idea of the plot and it grows with the book, and that always means an awful lot of rewriting.(6)

Many of Marsh's minor characters ("minor" in the sense of being peripheral to the series as a whole) fit the original meaning of the Italian word caricatura - that is, an overloaded
representation. The Webster definition is that in caricature "beauties are concealed and peculiarities or defects are exaggerated so as to make the person or thing ridiculous, while a general likeness is retained". 38 Henry Fielding's notion of caricature as burlesque ("we allow all licence - its aim is to exhibit monsters not men; and all distortions and exaggerations whatever are within its proper province", Preface to Joseph Andrews [1742]) borders on a definition of the grotesque proper and is far too wide-ranging to describe Marsh's depictions. Evelyn Waugh wrote in Life Magazine in 1946:

There is an intelligent question more often asked: "Are your characters drawn from life?" In the broadest sense, of course, they are. None except one or two negligible minor figures is a portrait; all the major characters are the result of numberless diverse observations fusing in the imagination into a single whole. My problem has been to distil comedy and sometimes tragedy from the knockabout farce of people's outward behaviour.(39)

Ngaio Marsh would agree entirely with these words; as she says, her characters can at best be described as "amalgams of people one has known". 40 An excellent example of Marsh's relish for extravagant impostors is afforded in the person of Major Hamilton Sweet (When in Rome [1970]), who is described as having "a savage white moustache and looked like an improbable revival of an Edwardian warrior" (3, 2:64) and who snarls and "yaps" like a spoilt ornamental dog. Sweet is, in fact, described by Alleyn (in a letter to Troy) in these terms:

On the face of it he's a caricature, a museum piece: the sort of Indian Army officer who, thirty years ago, was fair game for an easy laugh shouting Qui-hi at a native servant and saying, By George what? I find it unconvinc-
ing. He's bad-tempered, I should imagine pretty hard on
the bottle, and amorous... He's violently, aggressively
and confusingly anti-religion. Religion of any kind.
He lumps them all together, turns purple in the face,
and deriving his impenetrable argument from the sacraments,
pagan or Christian, says the whole lot are based on
cannibalism (4, 4:121-22).

When Alleyn links Sweet with drug trading and goes to interview
him, the "Major was right back on the form that Alleyn had
suspected from the first to be synthetic" (7,3:205), and he
later thinks of Sweet as "a phoney Major" (7, 4:211).

Dame Ngaio Marsh reveals herself to be something of a
mild social and general satirist. The mildness should be stressed
for even a genius like Waugh denied that he was - nay, could be -
a satirist in our brutal and uncertain century:

Satire is a matter of period. It flourishes in a stable
society and presupposes homogeneous moral standards -
the early Roman Empire and 18th Century Europe. It is
aimed at inconsistency and hypocrisy. It exposes polite
cruelty and folly by exaggerating them. It seeks to
produce shame. All this has no place in the Century of
the Common Man where vice no longer pays lip service to
virtue. The artist's only service to the disintegrated
society of today is to create little independent systems
of order of his own.(41)

The best way to describe Marsh is as a comic satirist in
the affirmative comedic tradition which descends from Shakes-
pearean and Jacobean city comedies with Falstaffian braggarts
and rumbustious soldiers, down through the Restoration Comedy of
Manners tradition to the work of Maugham and Noël Coward, and
also to the novel of manners (Henry James, E M Forster, P G
Marsh certainly (at times) shares the satirist's itch to deflate. While she may genuinely admire or seek to remain in the higher social levels, her use of hyperbole and pompous diction tends to "demythologize" and reduce much of the attraction of the upper echelon. Ngaio Marsh evidences the ironist's relentless tendency to demonstrate the gap between appearance and reality, pretension and actuality, and demonstrates a love of unlikely, learned and sometimes gruesome comparisons. While Dame Ngāpo is demonstrably a civilized, social more-oriented person, her fictional persona occasionally rebels at the frivolity of affectation in manners and to a degree at hypocrisy. But by far her greatest interest lies in authentic museum-pieces like the "antediluvian" Dame Alice Mardian of Off With His Head (1956), who is described by Superintendent Carey as "ninety-four and a proper masterpiece" (Five, II:81). When she is first introduced in the novel, Dame Alice is presented as resembling Mrs Noah:

She had a shapeless, wooden appearance and her face, if it was expressive of anything in particular, looked dimly jolly... She had loose-fitting false teeth which of their own accord chopped off the ends of her words and thickened her syllables. (One, I:13.)

When the indefatigable Mrs Bünz tries to steer the conversation towards her salvage mission for British folklore the Grande Dame absent-mindedly lapses into her own disjointed ramblings:

"Have you telephoned about the boilers, Dulcie?"
"Aunt Akky, the lines are down".
"Well, order a hack and ride".
"Aunt Akky, we haven't any horses now".
"I keep forgettin'". (One, I:13)
The author later notes that "To Dame Alice (who if she could be assigned to any genre derived from that of Surtees) class was unremarkable and existed in the way that continents and races exist" (Four, I:58). When the Dame gets up steam she is described as letting it off "by means literally of an attenuated hiss". The narrator's final verdict on her is that Dame Alice asserts an air of authority that must have descended "from a line of coarse, aristocratic, overbearing landlords. She was The Old Englishwoman not only of Surtees but of Fielding and Wycherley and Jonson: a bully and a harridan" (Twelve, III: 237).

Mrs Dillington-Blick, on the other hand, is an urban sophisticate, what Alleyn calls "in her own style a femme fatale" (Singing in the Shrouds [1958] Twelve, III:255) who emits rich gusts of laughter and who is renowned for her social "technique". The D B is depicted as "buzzing with femininity" (Four, II:60) and as "a tidy armful" (Five, I:82) with a "plunging neckline" (Five, II:86). Tim Makepiece tells his fiancé-to-be that Mrs Dillington-Blick is "the most suffocatingly feminine job... An all-time low in inhibitions and an all-time high in what it takes" (Six, I:110). But it is with the character of Mrs Rickerby-Carrick in Clutch of Constables (1968) that Marsh really displays her sardonic eye for social solecisms and the damning faux pas. Mrs R-C is innocently Pharasaical and Troy, whose first impulse on having to share a shipboard room with her is to run, comes to
realize that she is "a grotesque, a dreadfully vulnerable person" (4, Two:76), an exasperatingly intense and insecure individual. Troy, like all her fellow passengers on the M.V. Zodiac, finds Mrs R-C's obtrusive clumsiness irritating and writes to her husband that Hay Rickerby-Carrick is "Just an inksey-tinksey bit dotty" (2, One:35):

Her sledge-hammer tact crashes over Dr N like a shower of brick-bats, so anxious is she to be unracial... Mr Bard said just now that a peep into her subconscious would be enough to send him round more bends than the Zodiac negotiates in a summer season (ibid:34).

Troy, exasperation notwithstanding, has real compassion for this voluble little specimen and this recalls Alleyn's sage remark about his wife's "King-Size Bowels of Compassion" (4, Two:75). Troy finds herself asking if Mrs R-C is "Just a myth?" (3, Four:67) but there can be no doubt when she later spots the corpse of this nervous soul floating near Ramsdyke Lock, her face "idiotically bloated... Her mouth, drawn into an outlandish rictus, which grinned through discoloured froth" (5, Five:108).

Marsh also delights in taking down aristocratic buffoons like Lord Pastern of Swing, Brother, Swing (1949) whose diction and demeanour is oddly reminiscent of that of Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey:

He was short, not more than five foot seven, but so compactly built that he did not give the impression of low stature. Everything about him was dapper, though not obtrusively so; his clothes, the flower in his coat, his well-brushed hair and moustache. His eyes light grey with pinkish rims, had a not impertinent look, his underlip jutting out and there were clearly defined spots of local colour over his cheek-bones (Three, I:29).
Pastern announces that he may drop his title and we see this as just one more example of that uninspired lunacy which sent this bizarre Lord out upon several rather flippant excursions into Theosophy, Voodoo, and Indian religion. Lady Pastern and Bagott writes to her niece Carlisle Wayne, "Your uncle has turned with appalling virtuosity from the tenets of Christadelphians, to the practice of nudism" (One:10). As she so logically infers: "Imagine me, a de Fouteaux, suffering a proposal that I should promenade without costume, behind laurel hedges in the Weald of Kent" (:10).

Pastern becomes carried away by a new infatuation for jazz, and inadvertentely falls into the clutches of a gang of drug-addicted deviant jazzmen – all for a gimmicky drum solo. Alleyn considers this errant Lord as resembling "a truculent Pekinese" (Ten, 4:220) and Pastern ridicules Fox as a "Great ham-fisted ass of a chap" (Seven, 4:145). Alleyn has cause to warn this mock-Falstaffian goon to drop his "silly affectation of frivolity" (Seven, 6:153) and, although Pastern is innocent of any crime, he certainly earns any rebukes for his selfish and dangerously potty behaviour.

Ngaio Marsh is also interested in portraying several unmarried men of brittle masculinity, like Fabian Losse (Died in the Wool), Jonathan Royal (Death and the Dancing Footman) and Hilary Bill-Tasman (Tied Up in Tinsel). Little need be written about
Losse, as he is involved in classified war research and is affianced to Ursula Harme. However, when Fabian recounts his version he shocks the assembled company by breaking into laughter in talking of a murder:

Laughter bubbled out of him. He stammered, "It was so horrible... disgusting... I'm terribly sorry, but when you think of what had happened to her... and then to have three brass bands... Oh, God, it's so electrically comic!" He drew in his breath in a shuddering gasp (DIW Three, IV: 75).

Losse suffers from a crack on the head induced at the Dunkirk retreat and his nervous laughter can be attributed to that. He hugs his knees (an effeminate gesture?) and later sneers, making "a small breathy sound something like laughter. [He wears] the conceited, defiant air of the neurotic who bitterly despises his own weakness" (Four, II:83) and ends with a markedly theatrical verbal climax:

"Poor Douglas! Popping up all over the place as the little pattern of chivalry. But it's no good, you know. I'm hell-bent on my Buchmanism. And, really, Ursy, you needn't mind. I may have a crack in my skull and seem to be a bit crazy but I did pay you the dubious compliment of asking you to marry me" (:84).

Ursula later calls Fabian "my poor boy-friend" (Eleven, III:237) and there is little doubt that Losse will marry her and become a Canterbury gentleman-farmer.

When readers first encounter the bachelor JP Jonathan Royal he is seen to give himself "a little secret hug with his elbows" (DDF I, I:8), but it is remarked that "In spite of his finicky
mannerisms and his somewhat old-maidish pedantry, it would never have occurred to his worst enemy to call Jonathan effeminate".

Nevertheless he had many small talents that are unusual in a man. He took a passionate interest in the appointments of his house. He arranged flowers to perfection... (II, I:22).

Royal's self-confessed bogey is boredom; he is "a devotee of crime fiction" (VII, IV:115) and considers himself as an unqualified practitioner of psychology (VII, I:106). When the death of William Compline is announced, Royal becomes hideously hysterical:

Jonathan burst incontinently into a tirade of abuse. Mandrake had never, until that day, seen him put out of countenance, and it was a strange and disagreeable experience to hear his voice grow shrill and his speech incoherent. His face scarlet, his small mouth pouted and trembled, and behind those blind glasses of his Mandrake caught distorted glimpses of congested eyeballs (IX, III:148).

Once Royal recovers from this intemperate fit of histrionics he admits his share of responsibility (X, I:159). When Alleyn runs into Mandrake and Royal their suppressed conversation is described as "a sort of male twittering" (XIII, I:216). At the last, Royal admits to Lady Ablington that he is a lonely man:

"I do blame myself dreadfully", said Jonathan. He had taken off his glasses and his myopic eyes, blurred by tears, looked childlike and helpless, "It's just as you said, Hersey. I had to learn my lesson... I'm a mischievous, selfish fellow, trying to amuse myself and never thinking - just as you said, my dear" (XVII, IV:284).

Hilary Bill-Tasman is another of these irresponsible
"batchelors gay" (in the most innocent sense). He tells Troy
"I dare say you think it an effeminate setting for a bachelor.
It awaits its châtelaine" (1, 3:19). The châtelaine is Hilary's
new fiancé and a murderess into the bargain. Hilary is a moder-
ately pious High Church Anglican with a naughty wit ("I always
think", Hilary remarked, "of a warm front as belonging to a
decolleté Regency lady thrusting her opulent prow, as it were,
into some consequential rout or ball and warming it up no end.
The ball, I mean" [2, 1:28]), and he is classified as an
eccentric by Bert Smith (3, 1:55). Bill-Tasman's interest in
Cressida Tottenham is unashamedly based on her apparently good
social connections ("I'm a snob... I wouldn't have proposed
to my lovely, lovely Cressida if she'd had a tatty origin" (3,
2:62), yet he fails, in spite of his professed familiarity with
English literature, to make the possible connection of his
lover to her treacherous namesake in Chaucer's Troilus and
Criseyde, and to Troilus' lament, in Shakespeare's Troilus
and Cressida, "O beauty! where is thy faith?" (V, ii) Hilary
even admits to Troy that she may consider him effete (61) and
this is exemplified when he discovers, like Jonathan Royal,
that a murder has been committed in his Manor:

"But - look here, don't let's beat about the bush. I
mean, you do think - don't you? - that there's been -
violence?"
"When one finds blood and hair on the business end of
a poker" said Alleyn, "the thought does occur,
doesn't it?"
"Oh, Lord!" said Hilary. "Oh Lord, Lord, Lord, what
a bore it all is! What a disgusting, devasting bore!" (7, 2:148)
Alleyn later jolts Hilary with a recognition of his callousness - "I know what a bore it all is for you but it really can't be helped...and, after all, if you don't mind a glimpse of the obvious, it's been an even greater bore for Moult [the murder victim]."

Hilary turned slightly pink. "Now you're making me feel shabby", he said. "What an alarming man you are. One doesn't know where to have you... How you do cut one down to size!" he said. "And of course you're right. I'm behaving badly. My dear man, do believe me, really I'm quite ashamed of myself and I am, indeed I am, more than thankful we are in your hands. Peccavi, peccavi" (9, 2:204&205).

Troy finds that she captured in her portrait of Hilary elegantly, fastidiousness, insolence and some quirkiness, but she unexpectedly "unveiled a hedonist" in him (8, 4:184). Bill-Tasman, like Royal, is a quaintly sexy aesthetic snob ("I'm the last of the howling snobs" [10, 5:223]) with a penchant for disastrous experiments which have several features in common, as will be considered in Chapter Five.

It has been an assumption in this analysis that the creation of characters is an essential ingredient in any evaluation of a writer's style. Yet we must remember the comment that Thomas Mann once made to his friend Kurt Martens:

In fact I do not regard the gift of inventing characters and plots as the essence of the art of writing... I say that writers who have nothing but "inventiveness" are not far from the dime novels (March 28, 1906). (42)

Marsh's characters are Wodehousean in the sense that they are obviously literary personages and, as such, one may say that
they dwell in something of an artificial and even inflated vacuum. As for Ngaio Marsh's style and diction, she reveals herself as one richly exposed to English literary culture, the

very reverse of an insular novelistic dilettante. Dame Ngaio, apart from her love-affair with all things Elizabethan, values the creations of such diverse writers as Mansfield, Forster, Joyce, Proust, Gide, Henry James, T S Eliot, Thomas Mann, Nabokov, Greene, Waugh, Powell and others, not to mention an almost bewildering assortment of modern dramatists and even fellow New Zealand authors such as Janet Frame, Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Maurice Shadbolt and M K Joseph.

"Why all this extended concentration on the question of style?" one could ask. Evelyn Waugh said it all in his essay "Literary Style in England and America" (1955):

Style is what distinguishes literature from trash...
(T)he necessary elements of style are lucidity, elegance, individuality; these three qualities combine to form a preservative which ensures the nearest approximation to permanence in the fugitive art of letters. ...Elegance is the quality in a work of art which imparts direct pleasure; again not universal pleasure. There is a huge, envious world to whom elegance is positively offensive. English is incomparably the richest of languages, dead or living. One can devote one's life to learning it and die without achieving mastery.(43)

Few would doubt that Ngaio Marsh has a mastery of the language and, as a counterpart to the elegance which is apparent in much of her best writing, there is the added element of conscious artifice expressed, for example, in its often zestful and effervescent quality. This is no source of detraction, but it cannot
be stated that Marsh delights in an unobtrusive art in which the concealment of artifice is the principal virtue. One might go as far as to state that elegance and a delight in verbal artifice form a virtual raison d'être for Marsh. As Evelyn Waugh so memorably wrote, "Properly understood style is not a seductive decoration added to a functional structure; it is the essence of a work of art".43

It is my contention that, considered within her own admitted limitations, Dame Ngaio Marsh possesses a superb prose style and that her best novels are incontestably minor works of art.

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(ii) The Series Characters and their Retinue

All good detective novels begin in Baker Street.
-NGAIO MARSH
(Radio Interview, NZBS 1947).

* * * * * * 

The very English Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn, Scotland Yard, is the creation of Dame Ngaio Marsh, a New Zealander and one of the world's foremost detective story writers... It was Dame Ngaio's genius to create a professional policeman who also carried the mores of his amateur rivals Lord Peter Wimsey and Father Brown - breeding and education. Inspector Alleyn married an exceptional and gifted wife, Troy.
And in that, too, he broke with convention. I had a glimpse of a man whose mind and interests were at variance with his social upbringing.

-GEORGE BAKER. (44)

* * * * *

It is difficult to describe the detective's exact literary status, for he has no counterpart in any other fictional genre. He is, at one and the same time, the outstanding personality of the story (though he is concerned in it only in an ex-parte capacity), the projection of the author, the embodiment of the reader, the deus ex machina of the plot, the propounder of the problem, the supplier of the clues, and the eventual solver of the mystery. The life of the story takes place in him, yet the life of the narrative has its being outside of him. In a lesser sense, he is the Greek Chorus of the drama. All good detective stories have had for their protagonist a character of attractiveness and interest, of high and fascinating attainments - a man at once human and unusual, colorful (sic) and gifted.

-WILLARD HUNTINGDON WRIGHT (alias "S S Van Dine"). (45)

* * * * *

Is it true that Ngaio Marsh's supreme fictional achievement has been the creation of her "human and unusual" detective, Roderick ("Rory") Alleyn? Certainly, the connection with Marsh's theatrical interests is plain: he is named after the great Elizabethan tragic actor Edward Alleyn (1566-1626) who, as Ben Jonson noted in Timber (:or Discoveries Made Upon and Matter [1641]), founded Dulwich College in 1617 and deposited the Henslowe papers there. Anthony Burgess calls Edward
Alleyn "the first of the great professionals" adding, more suggestively, that this actor of Marlovian roles "probably first inspired Shakespeare with theatrical ambitions".46

Roderick Alleyn is a man with immaculate manners who is also robustly human. It is difficult indeed to conceive of anyone, save a ruthlessly determined cynic, who would not be "attracted" to him. Alleyn's suavity is accounted for by his diplomatic training and, in fact, in some ways Alleyn is a highly unconventional policeman. It was a maxim of Philip Trent, E C Bentley's odd artist-come-amateur detective, that "In some directions I decline to assist the police".47 Similarly, in Surfeit of Lampreys a visitor to the exotic Lamprey household later recalled that until Alleyn came into the case,

an image of a fictitious detective had hung about at the back of all her thoughts; an image of a man coldly attentive with coarse hands and a large soapy-shining face. Alleyn was so little like this image that for a moment she thought he must be some visitor, fantastically de trop, who had dropped in to see the Lampreys. The sight of Fox disabused her of this idea. There was no mistake about Fox (SOL 8, IV:112).

As Colin Lamprey more bluntly puts it, "If we've got to be grilled it may as well be by a gent. But then I'm a snob, of course" (8, III:110). C Day Lewis wrote shortly after this novel was published that Alleyn "is gentlemanly, unobtrusive and almost provocatively normal".48 Others would question this heightening of his normality, such as Haycraft who finds in Alleyn "a sort of modified (but not consciously imitative)
edition of Lord Peter Wimsey".49 This is to err too far in
the opposite extreme, for Ngaio Marsh herself wrote years later
that she finds Wimsey "excruciatingly facetious".50 Yet
Haycraft was right to insist that:

Though [Alleyn] is a hard-working, untitled professional,
his mother is Lady Alleyn, and doors are frequently
opened to him through family "connections" which would
probably remain closed to sleuths of less gentle birth.
Otherwise, the tales are faithfully naturalistic,
rather than romantic. (49)

Those critics who stress Alleyn's genteel background may tend to
overlook the fact that in real life if a murder is committed
in the upper circles of society, the detective's social equip-
ment may be of marginal importance (though it is certainly not
unimportant) in an inquiry. A E Murch parrots Haycraft in
writing that Alleyn is "singularly fortunate in the way his
official and social activities complement and occasionally over-
lap each other".51 Rather more simply, Kathleen Betterton
points out that Inspector Alleyn "is as gallant a figure as
one could wish"52 and Symons adds that "Alleyn is very much at
home in places where most professional detectives would feel
uneasy".53

What sort of man is Roderick Alleyn and what is his back-
ground? Was Marsh really as original with the kind of detective
she created as the actor George Baker suggests?

To take the last question first, Dame Ngaio was familiar
with Bentley's pioneering novel Trent's Last Case (1913) and
was reading issues of *The London Mercury* before she ever put pen to paper with respect to *A Man Lay Dead*. These facts are relevant because in A G Macdonell's essay "The Present Conventions of the Mystery Story" (published in 1930 when Marsh was on her first visit to Britain) a virtual prescription for Roderick Alleyn was made:

(T)he detective must be a professional. The long reign of the amateur is over. No one will swallow him any longer and Scotland Yard has come into its own. The intellectual murder-story demands realism, and therefore out goes the amateur, out goes the Baker Street Runner, and in comes the modern professional, shrewd, painstaking, untiring, and supported by platoons of photographers, finger-print experts, soil experts, foot-print experts, record departments and all the mighty organisation which, as every reader instinctively knows, exists on the banks of the Thames.

... Our professional detective...must have a dash of real brilliance in him as well. For this country-house stuff is exceedingly tricky work, and the clues are many and distracting. He must also be, though this is only a minor detail, of sufficiently good social standing to wear a tail-coat and dine with the house-party; otherwise the author will let himself in for a number of small worries about the man's meals. And lastly, he must be big and strong.

The point of this is not any naïve suggestion that Marsh read this article and then simplistically converted its emphasis directly into fiction. Rather more subtly, the fact is that in the period when she began to write her first detective novel, the intuition which developed so strongly and successfully was abroad in England. As regards *Trent's Last Case*, there the likely parallels or affinities are more evident. Apart from acknowledging that she had read *Trent* before writing *A Man Lay Dead*, Ngaio Marsh, in her early novel *Death in Ecstasy* (1936), used a pause in the narrative to inject references
by Alleyn to the work of Agatha Christie, Freeman Wills Crofts and Dorothy Sayers (Ch.XIV:120), and in Artists in Crime (1938) Alleyn mentions Sherlock Holmes and R Austin Freeman's unique Dr Thorndyke (Ch.XIV:176). In short, Marsh displays a clear familiarity with the then ascendant practitioners of the genre. So I shall argue that in more subtle, and perhaps unconscious ways, she manifests hints of the influence of Bentley's classic story. For example, Trent is a gentleman belonging to a club who likes beer, bread and cheese (like Alleyn's simple palate); he is described as possessing "native tact" and calls Inspector Murch "you old fox" (Ch. Four) which reminds us of Alleyn's fond remarks ("Brer Fox" and "my old Foxkin") to Inspector Fox. Trent also speaks, like Alleyn, of his "infernal cheek" (Ch. Thirteen) and laughs at himself ("I am Hawkshaw the detective", Ch. Nine) in possible parody of the phrase "I am Birdy Edwards!" from Conan Doyle's The Valley of Fear. Alleyn takes this up when writing about a suspect to Troy - "Hah-hah, did he but know, sneered Hawkshaw, the Detective" (Singing in the Shrouds Seven, III:153). Trent also refers to the criminal Hawley Harvey Crippen (1861-1910), the representative ordinary Englishman who murdered and buried his wife in his London home. Trent sees Crippen as an illustration of the lack of "strategic subtlety" (Ch. Sixteen), whereas for Alleyn Crippen is fascinating as "a drab everyday little man" (Vintage Murder, XXV:219), and Arthur Rubrick concedes in his diary that creatures of Crippen's ilk may not be "monsters, unbalanced and quite without the
habit of endurance by which custom inoculates the normal man against intolerance" (Died in the Wool Eleven, IV:246). Perhaps the strongest single affinity between Philip Trent and Roderick Alleyn concerns the vexed issue of capital punishment, towards which both men are unequivocally opposed. Trent says to Cupples that he prefers the saying "you never can tell":

"I agree with the American jurist who lays it down that we should not hang a yellow dog for stealing jam on circumstantial evidence, not even if he has jam all over his nose" (Ch. Sixteen).

Alleyn, as we shall see, finds in capital punishment a major focus for his strong moral sensibility.

E C Bentley wrote of his motive in writing Trent's Last Case:

It should be possible, I thought, to write a detective story in which the detective was recognisable as a human being and was not quite so much the "heavy" sleuth... Why not show up the fallibility of the Holmesian method?(56)

Marsh does not go as far as Bentley's affectionate exposure of detective stories where the hero entirely mistakes the identity of the murderer and then discusses "that last revelation of the impotence of human reason" (Ch. Sixteen). Alleyn, on the contrary, is a secularist and a man who appeals for reason, as when dealing with the household staff in Tied Up in Tinsel ("The very worst thing you could do would be to attack me. Think!"; 8, 4:188). This is more in the spirit of Sherlock Holmes, for whom rationality is paramount, and Alleyn resembles that Great Detective in more ways than one. Colin Watson
describes an air of authority (which Alleyn certainly possesses) as Holmes' "most noteworthy characteristic":

Perhaps it is the most important feature of any detective who is to prove a success with the reading public. For if anything distinguishes crime fiction from other forms of story-telling, it is the hero's implicit instrumentality in restoring the rule of right over wrong. He is not concerned, as are the heroes of novels of romance or adventure, with such personal and trivial objectives as winning the girl or making a fortune or escaping from his enemy. Establishment of the truth, vindication of the innocent, exposure and punishment of the guilty: to ends no less formidable is he dedicated. (57)

Marsh describes her own conception of Alleyn:

I thought that my detective would be a professional policeman but, in some ways, atypical: an attractive, civilized man with whom it would be pleasant to talk but much less pleasant to fall out... He was tall and thin with an accidental elegance about him, and fastidious enough to make one wonder at his choice of profession. He was a compassionate man. He had a cock-eye sense of humour, dependent largely upon understatement, but for all his unemphatic, rather apologetic ways, he could be a formidable person of considerable authority... I remember how pleased I was, early in his career, when one of the reviews called him "that nice chap, Alleyn", because that was how I liked to think of him: a nice chap with more edge to him than met the eye - a good deal more, as I hope has turned out. (58)

Erik Routley picked up this side of Alleyn's character when he wrote that "He really is a very satisfying and amiable kind of superman - the sort of person it is worth trying to keep on the right side of". Routley also notes that Alleyn has aristocratic connections and states "I fancy he does not live on his pay". Routley did not, in fact, need to fancy because this point is securely raised in Marsh's Opus I when Nigel Bathgate tells Angela North that he suspects that Alleyn is "a gent with private means who sleuths for sleuthing's sake" (A Man Lay Dead, XII:141).
Later, Alleyn's unorthodox valet Sumiloff says to Nigel:

"Alleyn began in the Diplomatic Service; it was then I first met him. It was for private reasons that he became a policeman. It's a remarkable story. Perhaps some day he will tell you" (AML D, XIII:153).

In actual fact this has never, in the forty-six years since Alleyn's arrival, been told in full. Marsh explains that on the day of Alleyn's "inception I fiddled about with the idea of writing a tale that would explain why he left the diplomatic service for the police but somehow the idea has never jelled". 60

When Roderick Alleyn makes his first of numerous entrances in A Man Lay Dead, it is with a piece of his cockeyed jocularity: "I've been given a murder to solve - aren't I a lucky little detective?" (IV:39). The first things we learn about him are his modesty untrue statement "I've a filthy memory" and the fact that Alleyn exudes "a sort of fastidiousness" when viewing the corpse (IV:45). Alleyn also inaugurates his strident shabbiness-inducing tone when Bathgate, the journalist, hesitates to help in the reconstruction:

"You have...you must confess, enjoyed the part you have played up to date in helping to round up a bunch of mad Russians. But now, when a criminal who is prepared - even schemes - to let an innocent person hang, turns out to be someone you know, you become all fastidiousness and leave the dirt to the policeman. Quite understandable. In a couple of years you will be dining out on this murder. Pity you can't write it up" (AML D, XV:178).

This sudden onset of testiness is not a manifestation of moodiness but rather one of Alleyn's self-admitted distaste for the final arrest ("Will you remember that?" XV:182). Readers also
encounter Alleyn's stubborn refusal to be daunted. When the murderer Arthur Wilde feigns incredulity at Alleyn's theory of the homicidal modus operandi the detective holds his ground:

"It seems a bit fantastic", said Wilde dubiously. "Doesn't it? Let us begin" (XVI:185).

Aside from his uncompromising bearing, Alleyn is described by Bathgate a few books later:

"He isn't in the least like a detective", thought Nigel. "He looks like an athletic don with a hint of the army somewhere. No, that's not right: it's too commonplace. He's faunish. And yet he's got all the right things for 'teckery. Dark, thin, long..." (Death in Ecstasy, XIII:105).

With respect to Alleyn's age, his author declares that "He would defy the investigation of an Einstein... It is enough to say that on the afternoon of my man's arrival I did not concern myself with his age and am still of the same mind in this respect". Marsh unwittingly ignores her own evidence as given in the earlier novels. Erik Routley argues that "Ngaio Marsh slipped a few cogs in portraying Alleyn after indiscreetly indicating at an early stage that he was 41 in 1935 (Enter a Murderer Ch.2)". Thus Routley states that "Roderick Alleyn's date of birth is demonstrably 1894-5, making him about five years older than Ngaio Marsh". Further, Alleyn is stated to be 43 years old in 1939 (Death at the Bar [1939] Eight, II:98) and 47 in 1943 (Died in the Wool [1945] Five, III:115). With the 1939 figure Alleyn would have been born in 1896, four years
his author's senior, whereas he was only three years her senior in 1943 (Marsh 44, Alleyn 47). Clearly Dame Ngaio is correct to state that fictional detectives "move in an exclusive space-time continuum", for on these facts Alleyn will be aged about 85 in 1980!

Roderick Alleyn is the son of Sir George and Lady Helena Alleyn of Buckinghamshire. We meet Lady Alleyn matchmaking in Death in a White Tie (1938) and Lady Pastern and Bagott allows that Ro-derick's father was an attaché at the British Embassy in Paris (Swing, Brother, Swing [1949], Ten, 3:211). In Vintage Murder (1937) Alleyn explains to Detective-Sergeant Wade of the New Zealand force that he:

"went into the force before the days of Lord Trenchard's scheme. I came down from Oxford, and after three years soldiering, and a brief sojourn in the Foreign Office, signed on in the usual way and went on night duty in Poplar" (IX:86).

Alleyn is told pointedly by Father Denys of Rome, "You're not the cut of a policeman, yourself" (When in Rome [1970] 4, 2:106), and in Grave Mistake (1978) Nikolas Markos suggests to Verity Preston that Alleyn may be "an exotic in the Force" (IV, II:109). The narrator also observes in Vintage Murder that Alleyn "might have been a diplomat" (IV:38).

By far the commonest descriptive motif concerns Alleyn's scholarly, almost ascetic appearance:

Alleyn...looked fine-drawn, a cross between a monk and a grandee. The planes of Alleyn's face and head were
emphatically defined, the bony structure showed clearly. There was a certain austerity in the chilly blue of his eyes and in the sharp blackness of his hair. Albrecht Dürer would have made a magnificent drawing of him... (DWT, XI:93.)

Someone once said of him that he looked like a cross between a grandee and a monk (DAB, Seventeen, I:209).


But when Martyn Tarne looked more closely at Inspector Alleyn's face... It was spare and scholarly...with a monkish look about it... When Alleyn spoke she decided that his voice was a royal blue of the clearest sort (ON, VII, II:109).

At the outset Alleyn had irritated Captain Bannerman by not looking like his own conception of a plain-clothes detective and by speaking with what the Captain, who was an inverted snob, considered a bloody posh accent entirely unsuited to a cop (STIS Three, IV:44).

Alleyn's brother is a baronet whom Alleyn "tolerantly regards as a bit of an ass" (WIR 3, 1:59) and in Black As He's Painted Marsh gives both brothers a charming scene together (Ch.Three, II) where this good-humoured irritation is given free rein.

With the use of the word charming we come to a major element in Alleyn's character. When writing of "the Hamlet magic", Ngaio Marsh notes:

That the playwright himself saw Hamlet as an adorable prince is, to me at least, indisputable. Shakespeare knew, as so many of his commentators do not, that one is attracted to people, not by their virtues, but by that unfairest of all qualities - charm.(63)

Thus it is that the vain actress Mary Bellamy is described as bestowing "the gift of her charm" (False Scent [1959], One, I:9)
without any moral contradiction. On the other hand, Troy often refers to her upright husband's "indecent" charm (Singing in the Shrouds [1958] Five, II:86) and she also speaks of "his donnish manner" (Final Curtain [1947] 13, 1:190). Virginia Woolf's phrase "the charm element" well conveys what is involved.

One of the central qualities of an acceptable fictional detective, according to Colin Watson, is that he "is traditionally a somewhat priestly figure, utterly reliable, incorruptible and socially unsmirched." Alleyn obviously manifests all these qualities; as he told a doctor in his first ever chapter, "Every detective has to acquire something of the attitude of the priest" (AMLD, IV:46).

Characters like Alleyn have to be very durable to survive treatment in thirty or more stories, so in what does Alleyn's popularity consist? Erik Routley very forthrightly declares that "Alleyn, we must suppose, is the last romantic hero in detective fiction":

He makes Lord Peter Wimsey look like a frivolous neurotic. His creator does not often involve him in hair-raising physical crises out of which he has to fight his way; what is perhaps Marsh's greatest distinction is that she communicates so much of Alleyn's character through his conversation [which] is apt, unaffected, economical, humorous and authoritative. (59)

Otto Penzler writes that literary naturalism was "primarily responsible for the internment of the romantic hero... Readers
of contemporary literature will find few protagonists in 'serious fiction' who appear to be stronger and wiser, more courageous, more compassionate, than themselves." Yet Penzler argues that the concept of the Übermensch (superman) has been kept alive in detective literature:

(T)he great detective in fiction today still carries the aura of invincibility, the power of ratiocination, the unwavering determination to see the game through, the infallible knowledge of truth and justice, that characterized Holmes... Flawed though they may be, as a class great detectives are a testimony to the concept of the superhero. Where else can we read of a protagonist who risks life, limb, and often reputation for little recompense? Who persists doggedly to the grim end of the trail, unraveling (sic) the case? Who ultimately apprehends the villain? And who upholds the law and - more important - glorifies the concept of justice?(67)

It was Sean O'Faolain, concluding his analysis of novels of the 1920s, who wrote that the only fictional territories left for the anti-hero to conquer "are those of the cowboy and the Private Eye". O'Faolain made the point that the Hero "is a purely social creation. He represents, that is to say, a socially approved norm, for which to the satisfaction of society he is decorated with a title". The anti-hero, on the contrary, is not a social creation: the distinctive identity of Camus' Outsider (L'Etranger [1942]) is predicated upon the decisive fact of his radical alienation from all established social codes and bonds. O'Faolain quotes Aldous Huxley's statement in his introduction to The Selected Letters of D H Lawrence (1950) that the vacuum left by the demise of the social Hero becomes filled by "a-social rebels, martyrs, misfits, minor prophets or,
in short, with aberrants and anti-Heroes". Marsh has no time for the rebellious avant-garde, as her statement about Edwardian drama makes clear:

In the days I am writing about, the Angries, the Dirties, the Blacks, the Existentialists, the Symbolists and the Frankly Dotties were not yet in action... We were still on the sunny side of chaos in those days. The excruciating need for protest was yet to come. (71)

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane have discussed the Modernist movement in terms of "a crisis of culture":

This, in turn, suggests that Modernism might mean not only a new mode or mannerism in the arts, but a certain magnificent disaster for them. In short, experimentalism does not simply suggest the presence of sophistication, difficulty and novelty in art; it also suggests bleakness, darkness, alienation, disintegration. (72)

Bradbury, writing about the English novel in the 'twenties, notes that the world presented is one "in which all heroism is lost, all quests suspect, all virtues unestablishable". Bradbury finds reflected in the work of Huxley, Waugh and Wyndham Lewis "a sense of an historical lesion, a lapse in human order... a transference into a wounded and post-war age". There is no evidence that the two World Wars and the Great Slump have shaken Ngaio Marsh's faith in stable and established order. To illustrate just how firmly Marsh has persisted in building what Evelyn Waugh termed "little independent systems of order" of her own, here is how the critic Jay Martin depicts the prevalent mood of the literary culture in whose midst Dame Ngaio wrote her classic tales

Scorning ordinary social values and emphasizing man's interior life, the whole tendency of experimental literature between 1920 and 1930 had been to turn values inside out - to declare the primacy of dreams over acts, of violence over order, of Sade's sexual gospel over that of the churches; of arbitrary over calculated action, and then to announce the superiority of the criminal, insane man, or the clown, over the bourgeois citizen. (75)
It is pointedly apparent that the whole fabric of Marsh's fiction runs to the direct opposite of every statement or maxim in that list. Thus it is no accident that she describes her chosen genre as a "queer, circumscribed and" — above all! — an "isolated form of fiction". So marked does Routley, as one of Marsh's most perceptive critics, find this circumstance that he observes, "She is never oppressed by any sense of the evil which righteousness is at war with".

For Ngaio Marsh [evil] is an aberration, but the optimism impersonated by Alleyn prevents our ever being really upset by it all. ... But the point about Ngaio Marsh is that she stays completely and obediently within the humanist tradition of human perfectibility: and this makes it possible for Alleyn to be what he is, and for anybody who looks for social judgement or political sensitiveness in her work to be entirely frustrated. (76)

Aside from Routley's hint that Alleyn is an improbable fantasy figure in a cruel and contradictory world, the point about her writings sailing in calm water "with no intrusions from ethical doubt" cannot be disputed. One has only to recall the fact that Chesterton, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Margery Allingham were all committed Christians, whereas Ngaio Marsh's "moralism" comes from the fact that she is an unashamed liberal in an era in which the term is a common one of reproach. Marsh's lack of political subtlety is related to her own statement "I am not a political animal" and to Bradbury's observation that the 'twenties was "markedly an a-political decade, channeling its progressivism into personal rather than public reform, into behavioural politics rather than social utopianism". If
we talk politics in Orwell's sense (there can be "no such thing as genuinely non-political literature, and least of all in an age like our own"), then Marsh's fictional politics are those of conservatism. We remember the heavy-handed and cynical treatment of the "Lenin Hall lot" (Nursing Home Murder [1935]) and the Coombe Left Movement (Death at the Bar [1939]), not to mention the stereotyped depiction of Simon Claire (Colour Scheme [1943]) and Cliff Johns and the shearers (Died in the Wool [1945]), and the amateurish political intrigue in Black As He's Painted (1974).

Perhaps we can account for Marsh's lack of an explicit ideology, and her refusal to detail a "world-view", to the circumstance of her presenting deeply moral fictions in a humanist school of writing - in the creation of "romances of reason" (Barzun).

Roderick Alleyn disproves the suggestion of Simone Weil (1909-43), the French mystic, who wrote "Fictional good is boring and flat, while fictional evil is varied, intriguing, attractive and full of charm". Perhaps this is what Routley meant when he put forward the view that Marsh's novels provide "the zenith of what we now call the Dixon of Dock Green tradition. Nowhere is the integrity and honour of the police force so generously celebrated". What Marsh's stories really celebrate is the relief which Auden spoke of; that relief at being able to divide the respectable sheep from the homicidal goats. While
Alleyn does admit that "We're all low at times" (Surfeit of Lampreys 14, II:215), we cannot imagine him taking to heart the Judeo-Christian doctrine of sin and, in so doing, recognizing a parity between all men as actual or potential criminals.

This is precisely the "secret" of Chesterton's Father Brown:

"I mean that I really did see myself, and my real self, committing the murders. I didn't actually kill the men by material means; but that's not the point... I mean that I thought and thought about how a man might come to be like that, until I realized that I really was like that, in everything except actual final consent to the action... I don't try to get outside the man, I try to get inside the murderer..."

"Oh", said Mr Chace, regarding him with a long, grim face, and added: "And that is what you call a religious exercise".

"Yes", said Father Brown; "that is what I call a religious exercise". ("The Secret of Father Brown" [1927].)(81)

Of this extraordinary passage, Erik Routley observes that "we go beyond even moral theology; we go direct to the central theology of redemption and atonement". 82

Of course Roderick Alleyn is no ordinary, humble Father Brown figure. Yet although he and his wife are referred to as VIPs (Last Ditch [1977] I, I:12), Alleyn is a very humble gentleman. This may be manifested in odd ways ("Good cigarettes are wasted on me", The Nursing Home Murder VII:73), as with the touching display of kindness he makes to a charlady in Artists in Crime (XV:191). Alleyn may be of superior class ("You seem to be a gentleman. One of the new breed at the Yard, aren't you?"; Death in a White Tie, XI:95), but he is exception-
ally sensitive (perhaps for this very reason) to police invasions of privacy. Rather dramatically Alleyn refers to his as "the lousiest job in creation" (AMLD, X:112), yet he eventually admits that:

"I'm not bored by my job. One gets desperately sick of routine at times but it would be an affectation to pretend one was bored. People interest me and homicide cases are so terrifically concerned with people. Each locked up inside his mental bomb-proof shelter, and then, suddenly, the holocaust. Most murders are really very squalid affairs, of course, but there's always the element that pressmen call the human angle" (SOL 7, III:99).

Alleyn shows odd flashes of quirky humour, as with his slightly bizarre statement "Oh, well, I must bustle away and solve the murder" (NHM VIII:70). He also resents the fact that "there is very little room for privacy in a police inquiry" (FS Five, II:129), admitting that secret drawers "are my speciality. At the Yard they call me Peeping Tom Alleyn" (GM VI, I:155). Alleyn realizes, cold-bloodedly as he must, that "in many ways ours is a degrading job-of-work. Custom makes monsters of us all". Fox takes this to its logical conclusion with a lack of delicacy foreign to his superior:

"I'm not at all fanciful myself, but it does seem queer to me sometimes, how calm-like we get to work, grumbling about the routine, put out because our meals don't come regular, and all the time there's a trap and a rope and a broken neck at the end if we do our job properly. Well, there it is. It's got to be done" (DIE, XIX:162-63).

Alleyn may call a case a "crashing hellish bore" (ON VII, III:116) or, more colourfully, state "It's a pig of a case... I hate its guts" (SOJ Nine, 4:207), yet he knows that "The truth of the matter
is I'm an incurable nosy parker. Detect I must, if I can" (VM, V:48).

Alleyn is also powerfully aware of the fact that, as he told the garrulous inhabitants of the Mount Moon homestead, "I'm a bit of state machinery. Any one can start me up but only the state can switch me off" (DIW I, II:30). As early as Marsh's third novel, Alleyn lectures the wife of a murdered Home Secretary by quoting the famous line from Hector Frome (counsel for the defence) in Galsworthy's Justice (1910):

> Gentlemen, Justice is a machine that, when someone has once given it the starting push, rolls on itself. (Act Two)

Aside from what reference to this very Edwardian play tells us about Alleyn's literary preferences (Beatrice Webb admired it greatly as Fabian drama), it illuminates Alleyn's own self-image as a policeman:

> "Galsworthy made one of his characters - a lawyer, I think - say that once you have set in motion the chariot wheels of Justice, you can do nothing at all to arrest or deflect their progress... As the police officer in charge of this case I am simply a wheel in the machine. I must complete my revolutions" (NHM, XV: 161).

This passage has a bearing on two matters: the presumed omniscience of the Great Detective and Alleyn's extreme distaste for the system of capital punishment. Ngaio Marsh firmly points out that Alleyn is "very anxious always not to cut a figure, not to try to make himself out an omnipotent figure". 83 When with his early Watson, Nigel Bathgate, Alleyn has to chide him on this count - "Bless the boy, I'm not a medium" (EAM, IV:40),
and he warns Maurice Pringle, "don't go and distort me into an object for hero-worship... I'm too commonplace and you're too old for these adolescent fervours" (DIE, XXV:215-16). In the more recent Clutch of Constables Alleyn is portrayed lecturing to police recruits and he reminds them that "Police officers, like the rest of mankind, are vulnerable creatures". He then adds in a mildly homiletic tone:

"You won't be any worse at your job if you can keep your humanity. If you lose it altogether you'll be, in my opinion, better out of the Force because with it you'll have lost your sense of values and that's a dire thing to befall any policeman" (9:190).

+ + + + +

The appearance of series "regulars" or staple personalities is one of the ongoing continuities which reward frequent readers of Dame Ngaio's fiction. A good example is the Rattisbons, solicitors who first appeared in The Nursing Home Murder (1935) and who are still going strong in Grave Mistake (1978). Marsh uses them as set-piece characters. Mr James Rattisbon, of Knightley, Knightley and Rattisbon is described as,

one of those elderly solicitors whose appearance explains why the expression "dried-up" is so inevitably applied by novelists to men of law. He was desiccated... He was discreetly bald, somewhat blind, and a little tremulous. He had a kind of quick stuttering utterance, and a curious trick of thrusting out his pointed tongue and rattling it exceedingly rapidly between his thin lips. This may have served as an antidote to the stutter or it may have signified a kind of professional relish. His hands were bird-like claws with very large purplish veins (NHM, XIV:140).
By the time of Sybil Foster's murder we meet Young Mr Rattisbon (65 years) who, with Old Mr Rattisbon (92 years) behaves "as if they were character-actors playing themselves in some dated comedy". They are described in biblical terms, as serving "unto the third and fourth generation", and the Huxleyan note prevails:

Both had an extraordinary mannerism: when about to pronounce upon some choice point of law they exposed the tips of their tongues and vibrated them as if they had taken sips of scalding tea. They prefaced many of their remarks with a slight whinny (III, I:66).

Another standard character right from the start of *A Man Lay Dead* was Nigel Bathgate, Fleet Street reporter. Marsh has again captured the correct feel of things; as Peter Laurie discovered, detectives are trained to believe "Journalists are bad. Never speak to journalists". Bathgate, Alleyn's self-declared Watson whose chore is to draw up interminable lists of suspects and motives for his Holmes, appears also in *Enter a Murderer* (1935), *The Nursing Home Murder* (1935), *Death in Ecstasy* (1936), *Artists in Crime* (1938), *Overture to Death* (1939) and briefly and finally in *Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940).

Nigel illustrates a problem in detective fiction in that he tends to be rather near a lot of murders (at the Unicorn Theatre and the House of the Sacred Flame, let alone being at Frantock and knowing the Lampreys) - far more so than is probable. Marsh eventually left Nigel out after five years
"because he was cropping up too frequently". She then ingeniously faded Agatha Troy in as Nigel faded out (Artists in Crime and thereafter), and although this cut out the improbable co-operation of a professional and a news-hound, and Dame Ngaio managed to dispatch Troy and Alleyn to the hymeneal altar without the longeurs associated with the Wimsey-Vane courtship, the problem remains:

I feel that Troy has been more or less "on the spot" far more often than was likely. Whether it matters or not I don't know, but it is clearly a concomitant of detective fiction. If you write about the same man, his wife and his friends, they'll crop up. It's not exactly a weakness but it's a sort of limitation in detective fiction. You've got to watch it. (83)

As Michael Gilbert (author of stories about Patrick Petrella) has dryly noted,

A purely amateur detective who is also a series character has somehow to account plausibly for the extraordinary sequence of crimes with which he becomes involved. If a corpse is found in the library every time he happens to visit a country house, people will soon stop asking him down for the weekend. (85)

Bathgate serves two functions: firstly as a general chorus to the action ("You always say, Alleyn, that money is the prime motive" OTD Sixteen, II:142) and secondly as a representative of the lay attitude to police investigation. For example, Nigel and his beloved Angela place bets on a suspect's guilt and Alleyn jolts them back to his characteristic level of intense responsibility:

"Does the decision rest with the judge?"
"What do you mean?"
"Well - if it does, you are betting on a man or woman who, if you're right, will presumably be hanged. I can't imagine you doing this over any other form of death. That's what I mean about the attitude of the
layman".
Angela turned red.
"That's the second time in our acquaintanceship you've made me feel a pig", she said (NHM XII:116).

When Nigel attempts to placate Alleyn with reference to the Lamprey's almost criminally batty behaviour, the Inspector replies sharply, "See here Bathgate you'd much better stay out of this. We had the same difficulty when we first met... My dear old Bathgate, it's only fun being friends with a policeman when you're not also friends with his suspects" (SOL 15, II:224). Not surprisingly this is the last time we hear of Nigel!

Earlier it was remarked that the Galton concept of Justice as a juggernaut related to Alleyn's displeasure regarding the death penalty. The point being that he can opt out of responsibility for the results of his work with this doctrine (i.e., outside forces take over in ways and means beyond his control) and, like Fox, Alleyn's conservatism shows itself in his refusal to use his authority and personal influence (translate "snob value") to protest at the system. Without wishing to be mercilessly cynical, this attitude of seemingly complacent acquiescence recalls the remark of Mr Waggish (in Marilyn Mainwaring's enterprising spoof Murder in Pastiche): "Mr Tourneur's all for being a gent".86 (This, after a clever parody of Alleyn under the name "Broderick Tourneur"). Alleyn, then, too readily accedes to Fox's view "It's got to be done".

Further conservatism is apparent in the portrayal of the
servant classes. Marsh explains that she writes of the upper orders because circumstances had it that she got to know people like the lordly Lampreys and because she is diffident about writing anything which does not relate to people and things she knows about. The best example is to be found in *Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940) where a constable on night duty by the Thames remarks to Alleyn about Macbeth:

"You don't expect people of that class to commit murder".
"No".
"No, you don't. And with the weapons lying there beside these grooms or whatever they were, and so on, well the first thing anybody would have said was: 'Here's your birds'... (I)f Macbeth hadn't got jumpy and mucked things up I reckon they'd have got away with it. They seemed to be well-like people in the district. Some kind of royalty. Aristocratic like. Well, nobody suspects people of that class. That's my point" (SOL 16, III:246).

The point is well taken, for while the constable's stray remark seems to cast doubts on the Lampreys' innocence, it actually turns out that, as Alleyn later says, Lady Rutherwood's maid (Tinkerton) was "like Lady Macbeth...the brains of the [murderous] party" (20, I:294). Manipulating the cupidity of the chauffeur, Giggle, so that he would inherit £300 per year and some property (19, IV:290), Tinkerton intended to marry him and leave domestic service. For this she was prepared to have her employer, a Lord, brutally murdered, and what is most revealing is that this sense of class resentment is left as a feeble and misguided idea, for the sting of class issues is smothered under our indignation over the homicide. The class element, in short, is defused as a legitimate issue.
The more prevalent attitude in Marsh's fiction concerning servants shows them as utterly contented props in the social scheme of things. A good example of the old stock family retainer is Barker, the butler at Ancreton Manor who, like Mr Rattisbon, is clearly a caricature:

He was indeed very old. His eyes were filmy and expressed nothing but a remote sadness. His hands seemed to have shrunk away from their own empurpled veins, and were tremulous (FC 12, II:177).

Barker is proud of his life-long service to the Ancred family ("My father was butler here to the former baronet... I was knifeboy and then footman under him" :178) as are Florence and the port-swilling Old Ninn Plumtree in False Scent (1959). It is established in this novel, as in others, that servants, "true to form, know more than any of you might suppose" (Eight IV:247). Old Ninn, like Rattisbon the "legal bird", is tight-lipped, possessing "a tiny gnarled paw" (Five, III:154), and she holds the family secrets at bay in conspiratorial opposition to Florence, Mary Bellamy's maid. Clara Plumtree is described as having a "sepulchral" voice and "truculent" manner (:153) and she, like a Sarah Gamp figure, falls asleep under the influence (:155); Alleyn describes her to Fox as "A faithful, treacherous, jealous, pig-headed tartar" (:153). Both tartars are shown in competitive form in a chapter titled "Questions of Adherence" and the cook underlines their loyalty when remarking that Florence was Miss Bellamy's, "body and soul" (Six, II:175), a true inferior whose speech is reported with what Colin Watson called "outrageous pseudo-Cockney". Both Florence and Old Ninn are
listed among the "insignificant people" (One, I:9) at Mary Bellamy's imagined gala funeral.

A minor feature of Marsh's stories concerns the generally deferential treatment given to provincial policemen. The pattern was set in A Man Lay Dead with PC Bunce (whose actions suggest "dunce"). Bunce is shown as a little man who exerts a "brief and enjoyable supremacy" at Frantock until Alleyn arrives, but who neglects to have a watch set on the gate whereupon a suspect escapes (VI:68)! Alleyn uses Bunce to shoot down a bannister head first into an ornamental gong in a re-enactment of the murder — "'Ead first into the gong as usual, I presoom?" (XV:180). In Dead Water Superintendent Coombe (Port-carrow Constabulary) becomes embarrassed at missing a clue — "I suppose in a quiet type of division like this, you get a bit rusty. I could kick myself. At my time of life!" Alleyn tries to reassure him: "It may not amount to much" (6, II:128). The same kind of laxity occurs in Off With His Head, where Sergeant Obby (an obvious pun on "obbo"), whose superior Superintendent Carey calls him a "silly danged fool" (Elwen, IV:217), falls asleep on duty while supposedly watching some major suspects.

Alleyn uses his celebrated charm to flatter provincials into the illusion that he is indebted to their expertise, despite the comment that a reviewer once made of Scales of Justice: "when will detective-novelists realize that it is not Scotland
Yard's practice nowadays to lend officers below the rank of Detective-Superintendent to take charge of provincial murder cases? In Scales of Justice comes this revealing passage:

"Did you form any opinion at all, Oliphant?" Alleyn asked. This is the most tactful remark a C.I.D man can make to a country officer and Oliphant coruscated under its influence (Four, 3:80).

Locals like the postman get a peculiar lift out of making comments like "I hear its reckoned to be a job for the Yard and altogether beyond the scope of Bert Oliphant which won't surprise us in the Vale" (Nine, 1:195). Alleyn finds the same kind of glow of interest from Sergeant McGuiness of the Upper Quintern Police Force, who "wistfully" supplies materials for a reconstruction ("I'd've like4 to be in on this") and, on being accepted for the job, is replaced for night duty by the "ginger-headed simpering colossus" called P C Dance (Grave Mistake VIII, II: 217). However, in Tied Up in Tinsel, Alleyn demonstrates genuine admiration for the thoroughness of P C Wrayburn; when Wrayburn puts Bill-Tasman through his paces Alleyn approves ("Good for you Jack, thought Alleyn" 5, 4:112) and he later tells him "You're going like a train, Jack" (6, 1:117).

This attitude of undisguised approval relates most strongly to Alleyn's homicidal henchman, Inspector Edward ("Teddylf") Fox, a bland, solid and moustachioed subordinate. Routley writes that,

The character in Ngaio Marsh who gets my vote every time... is Edward Fox. Fox is Alleyn's right hand man: unambitious, contented, courageous, efficient, and
Fox is the comic foil to Alleyn - the epitome of a solid, dependable and earthy policeman with a "large rosy face" (DDF XVI, III:261). He is characterized by significant breathing sounds - he sniffs "stertorously" (SOJ Seven, 2:150), breathes in a catarrhal undertone and speaks sepulchrally in what is described as his "familiar paddy voice" (COC 3, Two: 49). Fox is described as "a past master at the game" of winning gossip from servants (FC 13, III:201) where a man of Alleyn's pedigree clearly would intimidate. Alleyn told an actress, before he ever met Agatha Troy, that, "There are people to whom one need not show off... I've got one of that kind... I'm talking about a certain Detective-Inspector Fox. He's large and slow and innocently straightforward... I never have to show off to Fox, bless him" (VM, XVIII:161).

When, thirteen years later, Fox quotes Poe's *The Purloined Letter*, Alleyn fondly calls him "my cabbage, my rare edition, my objet d'art, my own especial bit of bijouterie" (SBS Eight, III:173). Alleyn also refers to Fox quite explicitly as "a sport" (OWH Seven, I:118) and he is described as "a North of Ireland corn chandler on holiday" on an even later occasion (BHP Nine, I:195). None of this is meant to be uncomplimentary, for Alleyn also praises Fox as "probably the most meticulous clue-hound in the Force" (COC 7:137).

Fox is Shakespearean in his sheer earthiness; Alleyn kids him about his success with female servants ("No doubt they respond more readily to your unbridled body-urge" FS,
Five, II:139) but there is a comic climax:

"Funny", Mr Fox remarked, laying out a rather dreary night-gown with infinite care upon Miss Hewson's bed. "I always expect American ladies' lingerie to be more troublante than this type of stuff". Alleyn stared at him. "I am speechless", he said (COC 8, Three:171).

As recently as Black As He's Painted Fox was still calling his superior "Mr Alleyn", but this is certainly an improvement on his earlier tendency to refer to Alleyn as "chief":

"When you call me 'chief', Fox, I feel like a cross between an Indian brave and one of those men with jaws and cigars in gangster films".
"Okay, chief", said Fox imperturbably (NHM VII:60).

This underlines Fox's plain manner of speech; what is referred to as his occasional liking for "contemporary idiom" (DAD 8, 1:174).

Significantly, when someone tries to poison Alleyn with a glass of sherry, it is Fox who accidentally drinks it (DAB, Chs. Seventeen and Eighteen), underlining the fact that he is the more expendable of the two.

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The expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action lust
Is perjured, murderous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust;
Enjoy'd no sooner but despised straight;
Past reason hunted; and no sooner had,
Past reason hated, as a swallow'd bait,
On purpose laid to make the taker mad:
Mad in pursuit, and in possession so;
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.
   All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
   To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.
   -WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE
   ("Sonnet CXXIX").

AMANDA: What is so horrible is that one can't stay happy.
ELYOT: Darling, don't say that.
AMANDA: It's true. The whole business is a very poor joke.
ELYOT: Meaning that sacred and beautiful thing, Love?
AMANDA: Yes, meaning just that.
ELYOT: What does it all mean, that's what I ask myself in my
ceaseless quest for ultimate truth. Dear God, what
does it all mean?
AMANDA: Don't laugh at me, I'm serious.
ELYOT (seriously): You mustn't be serious, my dear one, it's
just what they want.
AMANDA: Who's they?
ELYOT: All the futile moralists who try to make life unbear-
able. Laugh at them. Be flippant. Laugh at every-
thing, all their sacred shibboleths. Flippancy brings
out the acid in their damned sweetness and light.
AMANDA: If I laugh at everything, I must laugh at us too.
ELYOT: Certainly you must. We're figures of fun all right.
AMANDA: How long will it last, this ludicrous, overbearing
love of ours?
ELYOT: Who knows?
AMANDA: Shall we always want to bicker and fight?
ELYOT: No, that desire will fade, along with our passion.
AMANDA: Oh dear, shall we like that?
ELYOT: It all depends on how well we've played.
   -NOËL COWARD
   (Act II, Private Lives [1930]). (88)

At his first appearance Alleyn was a bachelor and,
although responsive to the opposite sex, did not bounce
in and out of irresponsible beds when going about his
job. Or, if he did, I knew nothing about it. He was,
to all intents and purposes, fancy-free and would
remain so until, sailing out of Suva in Fiji, he came
across Agatha Troy, painting in oils, on the deck of
a liner.

   -NGAIO MARSH (30).

*   *   *   *   *   *
Roderick Alleyn is clearly an "artistic" man; after being given subtle clues of his entirely unprecious aesthetic sense (a love of ceramics, paintings, gardens, etc), we learn of his aptitude for writing. Inspector Fox declares straight-out, "you have a feeling for words, of course" (DAD 7, I:146) and it is a well-established fact that Alleyn's textbook on criminology (Principles and Practice of Criminal Investigation by R Alleyn, M.A.[Oxon]) is jocularly dubbed "the Scourge of the Service" (COC 3, Two:51). In a recent no-vel this aptitude for prose is apparent when Alleyn winces on hearing people explaining a book to its own author ("they were probably right but laid far too much insistence on an essentially delicate process of thought" - WIR 3, 2:73).

Therefore, it is not unduly surprising that this man should be mentally imprinting memorable images of his holiday voyage in the Pacific when he meets Miss Agatha Troy, R. A. for the first time:

"Damn!" said a female voice. "Damn, damn, damn! Oh blast!"
Startled, Alleyn looked up. Sitting on the canvas cover of one of the boats was a woman... She was very thin and dark. She scrambled to the bows of the boat and Alleyn was able to see what she had been at. A small canvas was propped up in the lid of an open paint-box. Alleyn drew in his breath sharply. It was as if his deliberately cultivated memory of the wharf at Suva had been simplified and made articulate. The sketch was an almost painfully explicit statement of the feeling of that scene (Artists in Crime, 1:11).

Troy's reaction to Alleyn is to call him "very old-
world and chivalrous and so on" (AIC, II:20). When they both meet again, after a murder has been committed in Troy's studio at Bossicote, the irony of Alleyn's remark to his mother ("I very much doubt if I shall ever have another stilted conver-
sation with Miss Agatha Troy", IV:39) is unavoidable. Troy has treated Alleyn very defensively and, even though he will eventually marry her somewhere between Overture to Death and Death at the Bar (in April 1939 he says), their relationship gets off to a very shaky start, to "displays of frigid court-
esy" (VII:81). This notwithstanding, Alleyn tells his mother that if there is a chance that Troy becomes a suspect, "I'll leave the service" (IV:41). Many years later into their marriage, Alleyn holds the same unyielding attitude:

"But I'll tell you what: if ever my job looks like so much as coming between one dab of her brush and the surface of her canvas, I'll chuck it in and set up a prep school for detectives" (BHP Eight, IV:182-83).

Alleyn in fact conducts himself with exceptional chivalry, well fitting the Chaucerian epithet, "he loved chivalrie... He was a verray, parfit gentil knight" ("General Prologue", The Canterbury Tales). At one point he confronts Troy starkly: "If you will simply think of me as a ship's steward or - or some other sexless official" (XIII:160).

But it is not until Death in a White Tie that they are truly united in their affection, and this is aided - once again! - by the murder of a mutual friend, the fussy but
charming Lord Robert Gospell. In the Garcia case Troy had confided to Alleyn, "I'm terrified of dead people" (IV:47) and in Chapter XXVII of White Tie we find Alleyn grief-stricken over the death of the harmless "Bunchy" Gospell:

He felt a profound loathing of the formalities of death. A dead body was nothing, nothing but an intolerable caricature of something someone had loved. It was a reminder of unspeakable indignities, and yet people surrounded their dead with owlish circumstances, asked you...in a special muted voice, to look at them (DWT :227).

D R Owen, in his study of the Courtly Love tradition in literature states, "surely the nervous suppliant is still to be found, even in these days of lightning contest".

Is there, then, in the human constitution some inbred cause of these fears and emotional turmoil? Or could this too be part of the legacy of courtly love, an ingrained conscious or sub-conscious dread of possible rejection by the beloved?(89)

Owen is right: Troy and Alleyn are two "noble lovers" and the awkwardness which characterizes their early fumbling interaction may well have been caused by fears of rejection.

Marsh writes that "Alleyn is a fastidious man and finds certain aspects of animal promiscuity distasteful when there is no evidence of tenderness or compassion".90 Similarly, Troy disapproves of "mere promiscuity" at her Tatler's End studio (AIC, III:31) and Alleyn is validly sceptical about the "new" sexual morality of the Bohemian intelligentsia when he asks Bathgate, "how much of this owlishness is based on
experience and how much on handbooks and hearsay?" (IX:108)
Although Ngaio Marsh denies any explicit intention in the matter, the logic of the combination of Nigel Bathgate, about to have a child through the orthodox means of marriage, and the tragic illegitimate pregnancy of Sonia Gluck, seems to form a parallel of sorts. Nigel asks Alleyn to be a godfather (IX:101), as Alleyn will later ask Fox (SBS Eight, 3:175), and the picture of these solid, traditional, level-headed and consistent characters, when put beside Basil Pilgrim's and Garcia's exploitation of Sonia as a sex-object, points up the brimming immorality of the aesthetes.

A similar element recurs in Death at the Bar where the brusque Devonian, Abel Pomeroy, is angered at Decima Moore's leftist views on marriage - "'Be shot if she haven't got some new-fangled notion about wedlock being no better than a name for savagery" (Three, II:45). Yet even as august a person as Lady Alleyn approvingly described the sacrament of Christian marriage as "A direct and embarrassing expression of the savagery inherent in our ideas of mating" (DWT, XXI:186)! But Lady Alleyn does not approve of the rather raw attitudes of Waugh and Coward's "Bright Young People". She explicitly labels Donald Potter and Bridget O'Brien "those young things" (DWT, III:32) and Alleyn finds himself amused at the poses of these spuriously "sophisticated" young moderns:

"Are you engaged?"
"No. We're waiting till Donald begins to earn".
"And how much must Donald earn before he is marriageable?"
"You don't put it very nicely, do you? I suppose you think I'm hard and modern and beastly. I dare say I am, but I can't bear the idea of everything getting squalid and drab because we have to worry about money. A horrid little flat, second-rate restaurants, whitewood furniture painted to look fresh and wise. Ugh! I've seen these sorts of marriages", said Bridget looking worldly-wise, "and I know" (DWT, XVII:150).

Alleyn is far more concerned at callous moderns like Jane Harden, who says:

"People make such a fuss about sex. It's only a normal physical experience, like hunger or thirst. The sensible thing is to satisfy it in a perfectly reasonable and natural way. That's what we did. There was no need to meet again. We had had our experience."
"My poor child!" Alleyn ejaculated.
"What do you mean!"
"You reel it off as if you'd learnt it out of a textbook. 'First Steps in Sex'. 'O Brave New World', as Miranda and Mr Huxley would say!" (NHM, IX:91.)

Alleyn declares, "I dislike fatal women. They reek of mass production" (AIC, XI:131) and he would doubtless prefer the attitude of Prunella Foster in Grave Mistake (1978). Gideon Markos is a lineal descendant of Waugh, even though Ngaio Marsh does not employ the firm intensity of Waugh's satiric "microscope". In Vile Bodies (1930) Waugh presented a world of chronic fatuity; Christopher Sykes suggests that the title indicates the "darkness of theme, the blackest of black humour, which informs the book". A good example of this cloying negativity comes from Nina's clinical statement, "All this fuss about sleeping together. For physical pleasure I'd sooner go to my dentist any day" (Ch. Six). Lucy Tantamount says in a Huxley novel, "Living modernly's living quickl[y]" (Point
Counterpoint [1928]) and Amanda, in Private Lives notes, "We certainly live in a marvellous age". Elyot wisely replies, "Too marvellous... for the ordinary observer, it's too much" (Act II).

When Gideon Markos makes his de facto proposal to Prunella, the lady replies:

"I think you're fantastic. You know I do. Like I said: I'm too fond of you for a jolly affair... It's logical and civilized and liberated but it's just not on for me. No way. I must be a throw-back or simply plain chicken" (GM II, II:36).

Faced with this prospect, Gideon relents: "let's be engaged. Just nicely and chastely and frustratingly engaged to be married and you can break it off whenever you want to" (ibid).

Marsh's fiction is refreshingly free from sordid casual liaisons and the Alleyns' partnership provides an exemplary model of marital fidelity and fulfilment. For example, when Caley Bard takes Troy out to dinner while on the Zodiac cruise and asks her "Couldn't we have a lovely, fairly delicate little affair?", Troy answers in a business-like manner, "We could not" (COC 5, Three:100). Truly, there is a structure of responsibility inherent in Dame Ngaio's novels which is a fortunate carry-over from her Edwardian "Age of Propriety" upbringing. Also, Alleyn fulfils Routley's comment about the puritan ethos of detective fiction, with "the relegation of sex to a subordinate place in the scheme of human values,"
exemplified not least in the commendation of late marriage for men". Alleyn and Troy have a very honest relationship; as 'Kory says to Verity Preston, "Well, we like it" (GM III, II:75).

Marsh implies on several occasions that moderns "dress up" their failure to confront personal responsibility in the false refuge of Freudian jargon and its often bizarre Weltanschauung. The kind of thinking involved is well expressed in the comment, "A more enlightened age would have seen a complex in this action and worried accordingly" (Vile Bodies, Ch.Ten). Or, more vividly, in Coward's Blithe Spirit (1941) when Charles Condomine tells his wife, "I refuse to endure months of expensive humiliation only to be told at the end of it that at the age of four I was in love with my rocking-horse" (Act II, I)!

Malcolm Bradbury refers to Huxley's vision of man "as the Freudian hypocrite, a creature of self-delusion farcically posturing in the role of a sublime and civilized being while really seeking to fulfil simple and often gratuitous passions". There is a good deal of this attitude in Marsh's work, as when Alleyn slates Valmai Seacliff - "All that psychological clap-trap! She's probably nosed into a Freud Without Tears and picked out a few choice phrases" (AIC, XI: 131). Many of Marsh's characters make unsavoury dips into
Freudian lingo - Norman Cubitt talks of his frissons after acting in a poison play (aged seven) which "started me off on my Freudian road to the jim-jams" (DAB One, III:19). Alleyn derives innocent pleasure from speaking of two spinsters, "each a sort of Freudian prize-packet" (OTD Twenty-two, II:203) and Cedric Ancred refers to some problem-children on the estate - "Are they still digging for a Freudian victory?" (FC 3, I:35.) In the same novel Alleyn, who we are delicately informed does "not often indulge" in swearing (GM :175), resorts to a novel expletive: "Oh, Freud!" (FC 13, IV:206) Alleyn disapproves of what Jonathan Royal calls "Freudian mumbo-jumbo" (DDF VIII, III:124) and shares Fox's scepticism about "these psycho-johnnies" (DWT, XXVI:220).

A motif which recurs insistently in Marsh's stories is that of the Oedipus Complex, and all who use the phrase do so with laughable uncertainty. This is most vividly attested to in Death and the Dancing Footman (1941) where William Compline is viewed as suffering from, in Aubrey Mandrake's words, "The Oedipus complex with a vengeance" (VII, IV:114).

With owlish gravity Chloris and Mandrake discussed poor William's "psychology" and decided that unconscious jealousy of Nicholas, a mother-fixation, an inferiority complex, and a particularly elaborate Oedipus complex were at the bottom of his lightest action and the sole causes of his violent outburst against Hart... "And of course the painting was simply an effort to overcome the inferiority complexer, on the pain-pleasure principle," added Chloris uncertainly (XII, II:205).

Cedric Andred, in trying to apportion the blame for a murder
(committed, ironically, by his own mother) upon Caroline Able, does so in sceptical terms:

"I mean she's so wrapped up in id and isms and tracing everything back to the Oedipus Complex. Might it perhaps have all snapped back at her and made her a weeny bit odd?" (FC 13, 1:191).

Also, any obvious impostors are viewed in an unfavourable light, such as Mrs Cockburn-Montfort, whose modish jargon - like "shy-makingly mis-pronounced" (BHP Three, II:73) and "Too shaming!" (Six, III:137) - makes her an unconvincing revival of Waugh's Bright Young People with all their idiosyncratic phrases ("stiff-scaring", "rich-making", "sad-making" and "shy-making") in Vile Bodies.

Under the ban of darkness let us lie 
Silently side by side, nor strive to be 
Ought but quiescent in that vasty sea 
Where nightly, unbefriended, we embark. 
Let us lie silently, and in the dark 
Turning our faces to the lampless sky 
Seek out our thoughts of one another, 

Then 
May you alone of lovers among men 
Discover in your love, tranquillity. 
Let us not touch with lips nor hands nor strive 
Together. Then, beloved, we may live 
For one immortal breath in unity. 

Yet since, untouched, you lie so far apart 
I take again your head upon my heart. 
-NGAIO MARSH ("Heloise").
Many people find traces of Ngaio Marsh in the strong-willed character of Troy Alleyn. The parallel over painting is the most obvious case in point as becomes apparent when passages from Artists in Crime are placed alongside others from Black Beech and Honeydew. The "Group" studio in Cashel Street with Miss Carter in her kimono and its roaring gas heaters is translated directly to the fictional Bossicote ("the roaring gas heater... Sonia, the model wrapped in a white kimono" [AIC, III:26]). Troy's pointed questions (III: 32-33) recall those of the real Mr Wallwork, but the parallel can be made most explicitly:

"You see, once in a painter's life-time he, or she, does something that's extra... Something that they look at afterwards and say to themselves: 'How did the stumbling ninny that is me, do this?'" (Troy, Artists in Crime [1938] VII:77).

I knew hope and despair, hesitancy, brief certitude and very occasionally that moment when one thinks: "How did the fool, who is I, do this?" (March, Black Beech and Honeydew [1966] IV, III:98-99.)

Readers learn in Swing, Brother, Swing (1949) that the Alleyns are expecting a child and he, the six-year old Ricky Alleyn, is a highlight of Spinsters in Jeopardy (1953). Although Troy has been a major character in novels like Artists in Crime, Death in a White Tie and Final Curtain (and will do so in Clutch of Constables, Tied Up in Tinsel, Black As He's Painted, Last Ditch and Photofinish), it is in this novel that Marsh's own sense of family is most charmingly
evidenced. Ricky, like Marsh, is the only child of devoted parents and is, in his father's words "a precocious little perisher and no mistake", but his parents are wise enough to realize that "A lot of it's purely imitative. It sounds classier than it is" (SIJ Four, I:69).

Young Ricky is a panicky child with a strange tendency to end many of his sentences with the word "however". Ricky clearly has exceptional intelligence, but Alleyn tells Troy "let us take our infant phenomenon for granted" (:65). When Alleyn asks "Do you suppose it'll all peter out and he'll be a dullard by the time he's eight?" (:69) he need not worry, because when next we meet Ricky (Last Ditch [1977]) he is an academic don (teaching locality unspecified, but probably Oxford) attempting to write a novel. One of the most delightful elements of Spinsters in Jeopardy is Ricky's attachment to Raoul Milano as well as the sense of cosy familial intimacy (cf. the opening pages of Chapter Nine).

Marsh has provided, in this portrayal of the Alleyns who live in a cul-de-sac near Montpelier Square in Chelsea, a vivid instance of what the theologian Emil Brunner calls the "trinity of being" (a concept which reportedly derives from Walt Whitman). Brunner argued,

That every human being is irrevocably the child of one man and one woman; that every father with this woman, and every mother with this man, is irrevocably the father and mother of this child... The unique
element in this human relationship is this - that my existence (not my physical existence, my existence as an object) but my human existence is thus bound up with two other existences... And I, as father or as mother, with this woman or with this man, have given to this person his human existence; I... have taken part in the Divine miracle of creation... Were this being simply an object, once the thing was done, we could dissolve partnership and each go our separate way. But since this being is a subject, just as I am a subject, since I, the father, as well as the mother and the child, know irrevocably that this fact is irrevocable, then we three persons are bound together in an unparalleled and indissoluble relation.(95)

This precisely characterizes the sense of responsibility inherent in Marsh's fiction, particularly as it relates to sexual conduct. One may conclude that the Alleyns, in the casual words of Elyot Chase, have "played well" in the marriage stakes.

+ + + + +

(iii) Deviance and Didacticism

The true tone of the genre springs from the alliance of murder and mirth. The laughter is a touch sardonic and must never degenerate into hilarity. The joke of death is on us.

-JACQUES BARZUN (96).

We die in earnest; that's no jest.
-SIR WALTER RALEIGH.

Today no one would think of looking for heroes and villains in a serious novel, but in lowbrow fiction one still expects to find a sharp distinction between right and wrong and between legality and illegality. The common people, on the whole, are still living in
the world of absolute good and evil from which the intellectuals have long since escaped.

-GEORGE ORWELL
("Raffles and Miss Blandish" [1944]).(97)

* * *

Orwell's remark about popular writing goes astray with detective fiction in that the audience for that genre is a very largely professional one. As an introductory question, why the fascination with acts of deviance in fiction? Does repeated confrontation with murder in novels aid our acceptance of death? Is detective fiction tragic?

When an interviewer pointed out to Dr Janet Kennedy that Georges Simenon has admitted "that in his romans policiers he externalized his own psychological problems" and asked, "Is there any possibility that writing detective fiction is a neurotic act in itself?", Dr Kennedy replied:

Simenon says that is what he does, and we must accept his statement. But I have no data to claim that is what Ross Macdonald or John Macdonald or Ngaio Marsh or Edmund Crispin is doing. That is the kind of long-distance psychoanalysis that I don't like to indulge in.(98)

Julian Symons reports Professor Roy Fuller's view that the detective story parallels elements in the Oedipus myth and that it is "a harmless and purging surrogate for the Oedipus myth in every writer's and reader's life". Alleyn refers to people working anxieties off in their writing (DDF XV,
III:251) but we cannot help but think he is being a shade ironical.

Is Ngaio Marsh sublimating her intimations of what Malcolm Muggeridge calls "the growing depravity and violence of our way of life"? John Hick has observed that the plethora of television and film violence which is paraded across our screens "does not however constitute a facing of our mortality, but is on the contrary another defence against it, another device for not facing it". Marsh says:

I do not know what a psychiatrist would make of it, but I really have something unusually squeamish in my make-up. Although I have pretty gruesome murders in my own books, I don't actually have to look at them. And as a professional writer, I am helped by the exercise of finding words, even if the words are very disgusting. I'm extremely squeamish and I find I get more squeamish as I get older. Now I'd shrink from writing something like the death of the old boy in Surfeit of Lampreys, who had a meat skewer shoved through his eye. I don't know whether one's imagination becomes more vivid as one gets older - I don't really like reading about horrors either.

In her article "Entertainments", Marsh writes that "human beings are compulsively interested in death and since their interest is laced with fear, they prefer to indulge it at a remove" as under the very antiseptic guise of fiction.

If this argument is just, one asks oneself, does it apply equally to the author? I, who for some forty years have written about death in polite settings but often horrific circumstances, am extremely squeamish about the real thing and fear to look on it.

Marsh does admit to Keats' fear "that I may cease to be/Before
Of course as you get older you do think a lot about death—it's getting closer all the time. It's the only really inevitable thing that we can be absolutely sure of, and I think because of that it doesn't upset one as much as it might be if there was any chance of escaping it. But you know there's not—you're in the condemned cell as it were—you've just got to put up with it. (104)

Journalist Helen Paske made a summary of some of the means of murder employed in Marsh's novels and reported:

In Died in the Wool the victim, who asked for it if anybody did, suffocates in a wool press. After being rendered decently unconscious; Ngaio Marsh writes classic detective novels, not nightmares. Artist in Crime—an impaling and a draught of etching acid. False Scent—a deadly miasma of weedkiller. Final Curtain—thallium poisoning, death in agony and the horrors of an exhumation. A thrown spear, strangulation, heavy weights descending from a great height; rarely if ever does Ngaio Marsh resort to bang bang you're dead. (105)

"(S)ociety cannot begin to heal its violence until there is compassionate identification with the victims rather than the murderers", wrote Leslie Paul.106 Looking also at the recipients and not perpetrators of deviant acts, Agatha Christie noted:

Nobody seems to go through the agony of the victim—they are only full of pity for the young killer, because of his youth. (107)

This raises a curious point for detective fiction because as W. H. Auden remarked, the victim "has to involve everybody in suspicion, which requires that he be a bad character".108 In Marsh sympathetic victims do exist (William Compline [DDF],
Henry Jobbins [DAD], Mrs Rickerby-Carrick [COC], Alfred Meyer [VM] and Dennis the "queer steward" [SIS], but the majority of victims are objectionable in one degree or another — such as Uncle Gabriel (SOL), Iris Campanula (OTD), Carlos Rivera (SBS), Maurice Questing (CS), Flossie Rubrick (DIW), Clark Bennington (ON), William Anderson (OWH), Mary Bellamy (FS) and so on. Others in her stories are objectionable characters, yet false leads (Wolf Garcia [AIC], Sonia Orrincourt [FC] and Occy Phinn and Commander Syce [SOJ]). The murderer cannot, of course, be obviously objectionable in a "whodunnit" and S.S Van Dine argues that there should only be one murderer; "the entire indignation of the reader must be permitted to concentrate on a single black nature".109 (Whenever Marsh has two accomplices, there is always one psychopathic mastermind, such as Tinkerton or Cressida Tottenham.)

William Aydelotte has made the point that "the detective story introduces us to a secure universe... Even the handling of death contributes to this feeling of security".

(The) detective story, by its peculiar treatment of death, contrives to minimize the fear of it... It is something that happens to someone else, not to anyone we like or identify ourselves with. The victim, although he is ultimately avenged, is not allowed to be a sympathetic character.(110)

Aydelotte notes that for many victims, "death is good riddance". Even many of Marsh's innocents, like Sybil Foster, Hazel Rickerby-Carrick and Maurice Questing, are not people with
whom we would want to identify, and others like Jobbins and Dennis are cockney types without any social standing.

The Old Testament Pentateuch lies behind several elements of this genre's approach to life. For example, the puritan unease concerning sexuality is rooted in the Hebrew fear of "unclean" menstrual and seminal discharges (Leviticus 15), and their fear of corpses is well attested in another biblical book (Numbers 19:11-22). A third link comes with the Israelite ritual of the atoning Scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-28); as Aydelotte says, "By unearthing the criminal \[the detective\] sets in motion the scapegoat mechanism which shifts the burden of guilt from our shoulders".\(^{111}\) We might label this process the "Judas effect", for the murderer is a scapegoat "that can be beaten".\(^{112}\)

Horace Walpole once said that "Life is a comedy to the man who thinks, and a tragedy to the man who feels". On this showing Dame Ngaio must be a writer who both thinks and feels because her chosen genre exists in the tragi-comic (or "serio-comic") mode. The connection with tragedy must be seen in the cathartic feeling ("it is not I who was killed nor who murdered") and yet here, paradoxically, is the link with comedy and all life-affirming art. The "joke of death" (Barzun) can only be such if we have been spared any meaningful contact with it or with its recent victim, and detective
fiction almost always operates with what Marsh calls "necrophiliac et-iquette"! The point is well made with Suzanne Langer's definition of tragi-comedy as "averted tragedy" and Erik Routley's remark that the "object of detection is to detect, not to document failure". Routley sees this form of fiction as Christian art in the sense that it denies that, however improbable it may seem, tragedy has not the final word. He quotes the phrase "the Bible is inimical to tragedy", and it is clear that tragedy is only truly valid in pre-Christian times (as in King Lear) or in contexts where Judeo-Christian values and teaching have not penetrated (Antony and Cleopatra). Biblicism seems inherent, for Christie, Sayers and Marsh make quite frequent allusions to biblical events and characters and one could also state that God is the Primal Detective ("Adam, where art thou?" Genesis 3:8-9) and the Devil the original Outsider figure.

C Day Lewis adds that there is,

a significant parallel between the formalised dénouement of the detective novel and the Christian concept of the Day of Judgment when, with a flourish of trumpets, the mystery is made plain and the goats are separated from the sheep. (116)

The whole matter is beautifully focused in Singing in the Shrouds (1958) when Alleyn, Mr Merryman and Father Jourdain discuss the fascination of crimes of violence in a tutorial manner:

Father Jourdain hesitated and Mr Merryman cut in. "I am persuaded", he said, "that people read about murder as an alternative to committing it". "A safety valve?" Alleyn suggested.
"A conversion. The so-called anti-social urge is fed into a socially acceptable channel: we thus commit our crimes of violence at a safe remove. We are all", Mr Merryman said tranquilly folding his hands over his stomach, "savages at heart".
"Do you agree?" Alleyn asked Father Jourdain. "I fancy", he rejoined, "that Mr Merryman is talking about something I call original sin. If he is, I do of course agree" (Four, III:68-69).

The irony lies in the fact that Merryman is a psychopathic lady-killer, but Father Jourdain's point remains a valid one.

Murder may, in detective literature, come to be regarded as "a sort of inexcusable faux pas" (DWT, XV:134), and Alleyn remarks ironically that it is "a crime in bad taste" (DAD, 8, III:190) and that "Murder is beastly. Unfortunately it's not unreal" (HI~ Four, IV:140). Alleyn has to remind Bridget O'Brien of his obligation to find murderers, or else they might "asphyxiate someone else if it's going to suit their book" (DWT XVII:153), and he frequently reminds people of the awesome implications of withholding facts "when there's a capital charge in the offing" (DIF XVII:143).

There is a memorable moment in the war years when Alleyn tells Fox:

"Does it seem odd to you, Fox, that we should be here so solemnly tracking down one squalid little murderer,
so laboriously using our methods to peer into two deaths, while over our heads are stretched legions of guns? It's as if we stood on the edge of a crackling landslide, swatting flies". "It's our job".
And will continue to be so. But to hang someone—now! My God, Fox, it's almost funny" (DDF XVI, V: 267-268).

Alleyn, however, finds capital punishment qua death penalty a far from humorous topic; in fact it is one of the issues over which Alleyn has vented much moral indignation. Ngaio Marsh became very strongly anti-capital punishment after reading Gerald Gardiner's book, Capital Punishment as a Deterrent (Gollancz, 1956). Lord Gardiner, a Q.C., advanced the thesis that,

while I dare say there are a good many things to be said against capital punishment, the real point is that there is nothing whatever to be said for it。(117)

Murder, as Alleyn often states, is the ultimate act of deviance, for the greatest social enormity must be to destroy a fellow human being. W H Auden wrote:

Execution... is the act of atonement by which the murderer is forgiven by society. In real life I disapprove of capital punishment, but in a detective story the murderer must have no future。(108)

Auden overlooked the fact that detective authors like Marsh keep up with the times. Alleyn, when in New Zealand, referred to life sentences after the 1935 Labour Party victory. His statement ("there is a Labour Government in power here with anti-capital punishment learnings, so I fancy it will be a life-sentence" VM, XXV:221) is in marked contrast with the New Zealander Dikon Bell's outburst:
"There's no capital punishment in this country now. He'll spend the rest of his life in jail, and a damned lucky let-off it is for him" (CS Fifteen, I: 253).

The issue is one which has perennially divided liberals: Dr Johnson worked for years to awaken public conscience on the matter, while Dickens later conducted a dramatic volte face from his similar effort in Barnaby Rudge (1841), and it was the boast of that great architect of liberty, John Stuart Mill, that in Parliament he made a speech "against the motion for the abolition of capital punishment". 119

Capital punishment for murder was finally abolished in Britain in December 1969, and several books refer to "the hanging days" (e.g., TUT 7,2:149) of the past. Alleyn made the point very forcefully in Clutch of Constables that the death penalty had little deterrent value, when talking of a professional killer, Foljambe:

"Retention or abolishment of capital punishment made no difference at all to his professional behaviour: I daresay he looks upon the murders that he did in fact perform, as tiresome and regrettable necessities" (l, I:9).

In Black As He's Painted attempts are made (successfully) on the life of the Ambassador and (unsuccessfully) on that of the President of an emerging African nation. It transpires that the Ambassador to London had a readiness to use public executions (Six, III:139) and that many years before, the President had been embroiled in a celebrated plea for the death penalty in a murder case (Seven, III:161). The "Boomer"
(as the President of Ng'ombwana is known) tells Alleyn, "I had the pleasure of procuring him a fifteen-years stretch. It should have been a capital charge" (Eight, III:180). Alleyn's own displeasure at this attitude is clear, and this issue forms a part of the ideological gulf between the two men.

In the early stage of the Alleyns' relationship Troy confessed to Alleyn her "absolute horror of capital punishment", and her reasons recall Marsh's attitude:

"It's just one of those nightmare things. Like claustrophobia. I used to adore the Ingoldsby Legends when I was a child. One day I came across the one about my Lord Tomnoddy and the hanging. It made the most extraordinary impression on me" (DWT, XXVII:232).

Nearly ten years later, when Alleyn has returned from his stint in New Zealand, Troy tells him pointedly, "I don't think people ought to hang other people. But you do, and you're the policeman, not me". Alleyn replies:

"Books about C.I.D men will tell you that running a murderer to earth is just a job to us, as copping a pickpocket is to the ordinary P.C. It's not. Because of its termination it's unlike any other job in existence. When I was twenty-two I faced its implications and took it on, but I don't think I fully realized them for another fifteen years and that was when I fell most deeply in love, my love, with you" (FC 15, 1:224).

Both Alleyn and Troy have been confronted with other subtler kinds of deviance, such as the drug racket in France, against which Alleyn fulminates in a rather long passage in Spinsters in Jeopardy (1953). Alleyn calls the drug trade
"probably the worst thing apart from war that's happened
to human beings in modern times" (Seven, III:130), and the
whole section expresses his indignation.

There is a final, non-criminal, kind of deviance which
the Alleyns confront with typical compassion: racial deviance.
One of the most memorable things about Clutch of Constables
is Troy's frank relationship with an African doctor of medici-
ne named Francis Natouche. Troy writes to her husband
(who is in New York) that she finds it "hard to be civil" to
people who indulge in common little racist gestures. When
she and Dr Natouche go for a walk Troy comes confidently to
the point:

"Have you found many difficulties about being as you
are? Black?"
"Of course. How sensible of you to ask, Mrs Alleyn.
One knows everybody thinks such questions".
"Well", Troy said, "I'm glad it was all right to
ask" (2, Two:39).

Thus she can warn the effusive Mrs Rickerby-Carrick that the
doctor won't enjoy "special efforts" (:40) along the lines
of a "let's-be-sweet-to-Natouche movement"(:41).

Her husband remarks in Black As He's painted that the
fanatics of racial hate are "the ones policemen like least...
The haters of black pigmentation, the lonely woman who dreams
about a black rapist, the man who builds Anti-Christ in a
black image..." (Two, III:49.) Later Alleyn makes a spirited
defense of coloured people against the Londoners' prejudice
that blacks "smell":

"Yes?" Alleyn said, "I understand they notice the same phenomenon in us. An African friend of mine told me that it took him almost a year before he left off feeling faint in lifts during the London rush hours" (Four, I:82-83).

Touche, Monsieur L'Inspecteur! Alleyn may seem a didactic gentleman on occasions but it would be truer to suggest that compassion and empathy lie behind his entirely commendable and urgent sense of human values.

Truly the Alleyn marriage has had more than one fruitful kind of consummation.

+ + + + +
CHAPTER FOUR:

ANTIPODEANS

AND

ENGLISHMEN
He was raw, foreign, his accent was uncut, he was from a land which had not yet been glazed with people, where the rivers were only then being 'tamed' to obedience to the hydroelectric impulse or reflex; where...clay, not plastic foam, touched the flesh feet standing on the real earth. An unfinished land. Why, even the native peoples had not been "finished" in the way we have finished ours!

-"EDELMAN", Daughter Buffalo
(Janet Frame [1972]).(1)

We are often told by English people how very English New Zealand is, their intention being complimentary. I think that this pronouncement may be true but not altogether in the intended sense. We are, I venture, more like the English of our pioneers' time than those of our own. We are doubly insular. We come from a group of islands at the top of the world and we have settled on a group comparable in size but infinitely more isolated, at the bottom of it. We are overwhelmingly of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish stock and it seemed to me, when I came back after five years, that we had turned in on our origins. You might say, I thought, that if you put a selection of people from the British Isles into antipodean cold-storage for a century and a half and then opened the door: we are what would emerge... Our voices and manners have deteriorated to such an extent that many fourth generation New Zealanders have a strong, muddled instinct that prompts them to regard any kind of speech but the indigenous snarl as effeminate and even the most rudimentary forms of courtesy as gush. It is good honest kiwi to kick the English language into the gutter and it shows how independent you are if you sprawl in armchairs when old women come into their own drawing-rooms. I refuse to say lounges.

-NGAIO MARSH.(2)
(i) The Antipodean Aspect

It would plainly be a magnificent piece of understatement to remark that this passage by Dame Ngaio Marsh expresses considerable ambivalence toward her own native New Zealand. Yet this should not obscure her very deep and abiding affection for her homeland. The attitude is reminiscent of another partial expatriate, Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) who wrote, "America is my country and Paris is my home town and it is as it has come to be". In Marsh's terms, then, "New Zealand is my country, England is Home and London my real home town". Yet the paradox remains. With so much of her past emotionally invested in Christchurch, can this really be so?

Ngaio Marsh herself told Listener reporter Helen Paske "I love New Zealanders", yet Paske remained wary:

Strongly as Dame Ngaio is attached to the New Zealand landscape - her books are full of aching portraits of the South Island country - England is Home. She visits as often as she can, and her writing sits far more comfortably in an English setting. "Yes", she says gently, "I do call it Home. My generation did. It does feel like home".(4)

Yet Dame Ngaio had qualified this point ten years earlier as she reflected (in 1966) on the fifty-nine year old house her father had built - "I do have to come back to this house however much I love England - and I love it very dearly - I always have to come back here... It's just 'here we are again'!" More recently, she added:
I did think about leaving New Zealand permanently and going to live in London once, when I was very homesick for London. But no, I always come back. Because of the house, because of my friends, and because I'm a New Zealander. (6)

This kind of feeling for Britain as Home on the part of New Zealanders had its ludicrous aspect, as Bruce Mason testified in his play *The Evening Paper*, when Elfrida speaks of a New Zealand girl who longed for England, its art and history - "Home, she called it: She'd never been out of New Zealand". (7)

The more serious variant of this phenomenon was explained by Truman Capote when he wrote of his "expatriate notions"; that for him "Europe was a method of acquiring perspective and an education, a stepping-stone towards maturity". (8)

Eric McCormick has written of New Zealand as a "remote fragment of the European world" and quoted Arthur S Thompson's remark about New Zealand as "England's remotest colony". (9)

Ngaio Marsh, like many distinguished expatriates before her (Katherine Mansfield, Frances Hodgkins, Ursula Bethell, D'Arcy Cresswell, Jane Mander) and a good number since (John Mulgan, Dan Davin, Maurice Shadbolt, Allen Curnow, et al), shares the emotional and intellectual values of her native culture with those of the European *milieu*. This always involves a kind of dialectic of cultural allegiance amounting to social dislocation between two hemispheres, so well captured in the title of Middleton Murry's book on Katherine Mansfield, *Between Two Worlds* (Jonathan Cape, 1935). Such
an endeavour calls for the facility of traversing two related, but different, aspects of Marsh's cultural heritage. Her supreme achievement as a New Zealand-born author has been to combine the outlook of an internationalist with a firm loyalty to her own people and their traditions. Marsh has built her life upon the polarity of her experience of, and inclinations for, life in New Zealand and yearning for the cultural foci of Europe in a direct measure. In the process of this shuttling between, in Stein's terms, the country where she belongs (England) and the one in which she really lives (New Zealand), Ngaio Marsh tends to appear to some of her countrymen as a misplaced Englishwoman. Certainly Marsh can share the affirmation of Graham Greene's *England Made Me* (1935), and one can cogently argue that this geographical and emotional tension has been a very fruitful one in generating her artistic achievements, even if this has meant that Marsh has been misunderstood as a cultural prig by some of her own compatriots. One is reminded of the burning words of "Robin Hyde" (Iris Wilkinson) on the subject of New Zealand journalism in the late 'twenties:

Now all the Pretty Boys who've been to England once, come home... We must, they say, develop a purely Colonial style, no family or Windsor ghosts, local colour laid on as thick as a chorine's grease-paint. Sit about singing to tuis and babbling of bellbirds for the term of your natural life, but if you happen to think of something that might have occurred just anywhere in the world of man, woman and child, keep it dark. I hate these aggressively insular New Zealanders.
Marsh's own pride in her unique country is amply reflected in two books (both entitled New Zealand) which she has produced about it. Dennis McEldowney was right to point out that Marsh "has always continued to write about New Zealand as though she were a visitor, while believing she was a native"\textsuperscript{11}, but this need not diminish her national pride and loyalty.

Indeed, one may go as far as to state that it is precisely in maintaining this stance that Marsh's own expression of that loyalty consists. McEldowney complains that "when in one of her early detective novels she made some play with the many uses of the word "crook" in New Zealand, it was in the form of a dissertation to a visiting Englishman"\textsuperscript{11}. McEldowney, regretfully, has gained a minor point at the expense of a bigger one. The key point is that Ngaio Marsh had begun, historically speaking, to settle down in her private life from the diversion and excitement of London; that with her mother's death she was willing to stay in New Zealand to help her father through the grieving period and because she is a contemporary novelist in the sense of conveying her settings as they are at the time of writing, it made sense for Marsh to think of bringing Alleyn out here. This act would plainly require some preparation of her readers - even though she has stated firmly that "I've never felt that I had to explain myself to an English market at all"\textsuperscript{12} - in that an antipodean setting after her first
four novels (all with English settings) would confront readers with an utterly new physical and linguistic environment. Therefore, it seems highly likely that when Dame Ngaio began to write *Death in Escotasy* in New Zealand in 1935, she dropped small hints about the mores of the southern dominions for such a reason. The fact is that Australia, New Zealand and other English colonies provided staple exotic references in much nineteenth century British fiction. We all recall the exhortations of Carlyle and Dickens in favour of emigration from the Mother Country, and remember the Peggottys and Micawbers settling in Australia at the close of *David Copperfield*. More pertinently, and later in the piece, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle sprinkled his chronicles about Sherlock Holmes with passing references to the Antipodes. Conan Doyle followed the Dickensian formula: one either envisages Australia as, in Routley's words, "the origin of lawlessness and licence" (viz., Magwitch's exile to Botany Bay in *Great Expectations*), or as a source of new opportunities (the Micawber equation). For example, in Conan Doyle's "A Case of Identity" (Adventure III), Mary Sutherland tells Holmes of her Uncle Ned in Auckland having left her an income in New Zealand stock, and in "The Adventure of the 'Gloria Scott'" Holmes extravagantly deduces that Victor Trevor has been making money on the New Zealand goldfields. Similarly, in "The Adventure of the Priory School" (1904), Holmes is assured that James Wilder shall go "to seek his fortune in Australia". Roderick Alleyn has
occasion to remark about this attitude to the colonies, when discussing the unruly and dissipated English 'bear-cub' Gordon Palmer with Harily Hambledon, while on the train to Middleton:

"It is strange", said the tall man, "how a certain type of Englishman still regards the Dominions either as a wastepaper basket or a purge". (Vintage Murder, Ch.I:16)

This antipodean motif first creeps into Marsh's fiction when, in her novel Death in Ecstasy (1936), it appears that the murdered woman (Cara Quayne) had relatives - in the words of her confused old Nannie - "in New Zealand or some such place". (Ch.XIII:107). Quayne's solicitor, Rattisbon, confirms that there was a third cousin in New Zealand (Ch.XV:125), and Alleyn, having displayed an acquaintance with Australian lingo ("down under", p.127 and "Jakealoo", p.146), tells Fox that he has been to Australia (Ch.XIX:160-61) and that the case calls for him to send a cable there. Alleyn has suspected the false Americanese of Samuel Ogden, and the plot turns on this lead. Alleyn has noted Ogden's solecisms like "Good-oh" ("Now 'Good-oh' is purest dyed-in-the-wool Australian", Ch.XXV:220) and this fact helps him apprehend Ogden as murderer. It must therefore come as little surprise to her faithful readers when Ngaio Marsh's next mystery, Vintage Murder, reports on a crime committed amongst an English touring company in New Zealand.
It is noteworthy that this appearance of New Zealand as a setting (with Chief Detective-Inspector Alleyn in attendance) and the later presentation of New Zealanders in England parallels the oscillating pattern of Ngaio Marsh's own life. For example, she set *Vintage Murder* (1937), *Colour Scheme* (1943) and *Died in the Wool* (1945) in New Zealand, then later sent expatriates to England in *Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940), *Opening Night* (1951), *Dead Water* (1964) and *Death at the Dolphin* (1966). Finally, in her later years, Marsh has returned her focus to the land of her birth with the short stories ("A Fool About Money" (1974) and "Morepork" (1978) and the new novel *Photofinish* (1980). It is to an examination of these works that we now turn.

+ + + + +

It seems to me that in this country we do not yet grow out of our surroundings... We are transplanted English. We move across the surface of this country, we super-impose our racial habit upon a dry background.(17)

New Zealand stands like a cranky little coda, at the bottom of the world. Its isolation is extreme. A New Zealander travelling in Australia is rather more conscious of making a long journey than an Englishman visiting Canada, and most of the stock jokes against Englishmen spring from their habit of regarding New Zealand as a sort of Australian adjunct.(18)

-NGAIO MARSH.

* * * * *

The poet Allen Curnow has written of the idea that the
presence of New Zealanders "in these islands is accidental, irrelevant; that we are interlopers on an indifferent or hostile scene", and R A K Mason also situates his countrymen

Here in this far-pitched perilous hostile place
this solitary hard-assaulted spot
fixed at the friendless outer edge of space.(19)

We are reminded of the Frenchwoman in Shadbolt's Strangers
and Journeys who conceives (in awe) of New Zealand at "the end of the world... Almost nowhere"20 and of J B Priestley's perception of the inherent New Zealand,
sense of remoteness, of being on an island lost in a huge ocean where the next stop is the Antarctic wilderness. (T)here are those occasional moments when the landscape itself suddenly seems sinister and menacing, and such moments bring people to a feeling of a common destiny and so encourage them to be helpful and friendly.(21)

Whenever Ngaio Marsh has written of New Zealand she is at pains to stress the primal qualities of its landscape. When Inspector Alleyn first arrives here we see him on a night train, travelling in the country north of Palmerston North along the Main Trunk Line. This "new country" is described as "very remote and strange" (VM, I:10); Marsh conjures up the very crispness of the mountain air, and it is not surprising that Alleyn should later exclaim about "snow in the back-country!", for "he was aware of a new world" (VM, XV:138).

New Zealand is, of course, a new world in a dual sense: on the one hand it is obviously new to a Briton and on the other the accent falls clearly upon that sense (which has always been strong, and instinctively so, for Marsh) of the "primordial";
that the sense of belonging to [the landscape] was disturbed by a doubt that, for all our adoptive gestures, our presence here was no more than a cobweb across the hide of a monster, that in spite of our familiarity with its surface we had made no mark upon our country and were still newcomers...
It is a feeling that deepens rather than modifies one's attachment to New Zealand. (22)

Writing in 1934 Ngaio Marsh made the point that any good writing about New Zealand could only be accomplished by "the most stringent austerity of style".

It seems to me that the landscape can be felt only through the spiritual and mental experiences of human beings. If these are realised it may be that the shapes of mountains and rivers will appear, not as so many theatrical properties, but inevitably, so that the story could have unfolded in no other setting. (17)

How well, then, does Marsh herself manage to handle those imposing mountains which she has elsewhere described as "the leit-motif of a landscape for full orchestra"? Marsh very cautiously describes a mountain at dawn bathed in the rosy glow of the sun, "too austere to be theatrical, but so vivid that its beauty was painful" (VM, XV:140). This scene evidences an attempt to practise her own critical strictures two years after they were written. Marsh uses the highly sensitive (one might say sensuous and even painterly) consciousness of Roderick Alleyn to register the many shades and nuances of the New Zealand environs. In this sense Professor Joan Stevens appears to have misjudged Marsh's tactic when she writes that the New Zealand novels,

are not among Ngaio Marsh's best stories; Alleyn does not have his wonted sparkle among the geysers and the sheep. (24)
Marsh is not simply "putting in a word" for the Antipodes with these stories — indeed, unlike Agatha Christie, she declines to use exotic settings (like Asia, Africa or even the United States) which she does not know well, if at all. It is precisely by keeping Alleyn in an uncertain relation to this new locale (at the risk of toning him down) that Marsh must have hoped that a truer image of New Zealand could be presented. (One hardly thinks Alleyn below par in Colour Scheme and Died in the Wool, surely).

Alleyn (not the author) remarks to Carolyn Dacres that the mountains nearby are "so very up-stage and magnificent" (VM; XVII:157), and he has previously written in a letter to his beloved Teddy Fox about the "dark wet smell" of the native forest (VM; XVI:144). Marsh uses chapters XVII ("Change of Scene") and XVIII ("Duologue") as a sort of set-piece description of these phenomena. Alleyn later tells Dr Rangi Te Pokiha that he likes the smell of "the bush" (VM; XXII:199), and in so doing the genteel Englishman has capitulated to using a characteristically New Zealand expression. Miss Dacres is likewise "deeply moved" (VM; XVII:160) in the bush setting, while a solitary bellbird (significantly Marsh leaves it unnamed) rings with a deep, slow and remote cadence (159). Later Alleyn muse~upon the sounds of the mountain stream and a bird "with a note like a little gong" (XVIII:161). Marsh has written memorably and lovingly of the bellbird ("If
you camp in the bush you hear him at dawn, and his song is for all the world like a little silver bell"[25]), and, like her, Alleyn finds himself almost mystically bewitched by this bush environment:

He turned uphill, and after a short climb, be entered into the bush. It was all that remained of a tall forest. Boles of giant trees stood like rooted columns among the heavy green underbrush, and rose high above it into tessellated clusters of heavy green. Light and dull green were the tree-ferns, light and dull green the ferns underfoot. There was something primal and earthy about this interlacing of greens. It was dark in the bush, and cool, and the only sound there was the sound of trickling water, finding its way downhill to the creek. There was a smell of wet moss, of cold wet earth, and of the sticky sweet gum that sweated out of some of the tree trunks. Alleyn thought it a good smell, clean and pungent. Suddenly, close at hand, the bird called again — a solitary call, startlingly like a bell. Then this unseen bird shook from its throat a phrase of notes in a minor key, each note very round with something human in its quality. The brief song ended in a comic splutter. There was a sound of twigs. Then the call rang again and was answered from somewhere deep in the bush, and back into the silence came the sound of running water. (VM, XVII:166).

This is a subtle, brilliantly taut and rhythmically evocative passage of descriptive writing. The whole picnic episode is sensitively modulated, so as to suggest something of the underlying logic of Nature and the human response to it. Alleyn, even in the midst of a murder inquiry, has sufficient savoir-faire to boil a billy for smoked tea New Zealand-style (XVIII:162)! Since this is Alleyn's first visit to New Zealand with the added fact that he is only here on a holiday recuperating after "a big operation" (VM, XV:134), is it stretching our credulity to see him performing such a thoroughly indigenous
gesture and then to remember "tales of bushmen" (XVIII:167)? It does not much matter, for we have no way of knowing how long Alleyn has been in New Zealand and the detective novel is, as has already been noted, an artificial kind of fiction with conventions peculiar to itself. The important thing is the final comment (again a reflection in Alleyn's mind) on the bush as

Like the expression of some large and simple personality. "It is quite inhuman", he thought, "but it is not unfriendly" (VM:ibid). Miss Dacres (whose simple, unaffected husband has been murdered by a crashing jeroboam of champers, and is hence the victim of a "Vintage Murder") is a kindred spirit to Alleyn, as she reflects that her pain has not touched the world of the bush:

"No," said Alleyn, "it is very remote. We were interlopers but vaguely welcome, don't you think?" "Yes. It is a friendly place really". (VM, XIX:174)

This section of Vintage Murder is admittedly reminiscent of the romanticized colonial novels, best exemplified in William Satchell's attitude towards the New Zealand bush. But Marsh makes it clear that "I've read Satchell, Maning, numbers of early colonial reminiscences, and Wakefield but so long ago that I have forgotten them".26

Marsh has written about second and third generation writers "who were so anxious to be 'New Zealand' at all costs that they overloaded their poems and short stories and novels with local colour, Maori words, and colonial slang".27
(Marsh had earlier written of Frank Sargeson that he was able "to write of his country without embarrassing himself in a surfeit of local colour".28 The same verdict safely applies to her own novels.)

One of the staple ingredients of Mrs Evans' colonial novels, according to E H McCormick, was that "When a colonial is introduced it is as a bucolic foil to the god-like principal characters".29 Can the same be said in respect of Alleyn in Vintage Murder? Professor Ian Gordon has no doubts that this is generally so, and he writes of

The idea that there is something to be ashamed of in speaking New Zealand English which still haunts us. We see ourselves as the minor character in one of Ngaio Marsh's own whodunnits who speaks in a way that "betrays his antipodean origin". He is always good for a laugh.(30)

From the moment when Alleyn meets the plain and deferential New Zealand detectives ("By cripes sir, I'm sorry. We'd heard you were - we didn't know - I mean - "; VI:54) his position as one of authority is unmistakeable. This becomes frankly unbearably embarrassing to the reader, as when young Detective-Inspector Packer oozes forth "instant and acute hero-worship" for Alleyn:

"He looks like one of those swells in the English flicks", he afterwards confided to his girl, "and he talks with a corker sort of voice. Not queeny, but just corker. I reckon he's all right. Gosh, I reckon he's a humdinger". (VM, VI:65)

This is admittedly dreadful, and it creates a cruel
caricature of a coarse and naively oafish colonial. With phrases like these, Marsh's respect for her own people is thrown sharply into question. When Detective-Sergeant Cass (perhaps better named Crass) is "shaken by a stupendous belch" (VM, X V:138) we must ask what exactly Marsh is getting at. And when Detective-Sergeant Wade finds that Alleyn wants to pre-empt his role by conducting the interview with the stunning Carolyn Dacres, the former erupts into a frenzy of tactless apologizing which causes the superbly poised Alleyn to look "rather sick" (XVII:151). At this point in the novel Marsh's usual subtlety has deserted her. Why? The answer, as ever, lies in the detectives' lack of that style and verbal panache which so characterizes Roderick Alleyn. Principally Marsh enjoys displaying the curious antipodean patois to her cultivated readers back Home. Some of these words include "Good-oh" (:46 & 56), "corker", "blooming nark" (:98), "New Zillund" (:99), "crikey" and "By gee" (an antipodean variant of Fox's over-used "cripes" and "Lor!")", "a fair cow" (:123), "dikkon" (:195), and so forth. Ngaio Marsh has explained that,

What is happening is that in a way the English people in these books - or the non-New Zealanders - are in the position of the reader. They're encountering "New Zealandisms" for the first time and so is the reader. (12)

So far, so good. In his letter to Fox, Alleyn sets down on paper his definitions of the jargon (XVI:145); by far his biggest linguistic headache was occasioned by the word crook ("What, oh what", wondered Alleyn, "is the fine shade of
meaning attached to this word 'crook'? VII:84).

"He was looking horribly crook".
"Ill?" asked Alleyn cautiously.
"Too right, sir". (X:99)

As Marsh herself explains, "poor Alleyn is completely confused" by the incessant use of this word. "He doesn't know whether they mean they are criminals or whether they mean they are invalids when they say somebody's a crook. Does that mean he's ill, does that mean he's a burglar?" 12 Alleyn's must however, be a poor ear, for surely the presence of that vital, qualifying "a" settles the distinction (i.e., one is either crook [ill] or a "crook" [criminal]). Alleyn secretly enjoys this "adjective/noun?" confusion, and derives even more pleasure from being so decently urbane and accommodating about it ("I hope I shan't get on their nerves" :145).

There are other slightly absurd touches in this novel which gently flaw an otherwise excellent piece of craftsmanship; for instance, when the rather incautious Wade flatters Alleyn about his book Principles and Practice of Criminal Investigation ("We've all been trained on your book", VI:54). As a reviewer for the Scotsman notes with innocent irony, we learn that Alleyn "has written a volume on criminology which is a classic for the police forces of the Empire"! 31 An additional example of novelistic hyperbole concerns the description by Gascoigne of the Meyer-Mason Theatre Company as "the biggest theatre combine in Europe" (VII:72). Is this
an instance of those grandiose fantasies to which detective fiction is commonly assumed to pander? Yet we recall E C Bentley's similar superlatives (which have decided irony) about the magnifico Sigsbee Manderson in Trent's Last Case (1913), not to mention Chesterton's subsequent devilish send-up of effusive American magnates. There is yet another possibility, which relates to Marsh's obvious fascination with "theatrical" people.

I've had personal experience of actors and I like writing about actors. (32) Actors are very good material for detective fiction because of their very extreme way of expressing things. They're not reticent people - they're the very reverse of being reticent and so they are fun to write about. (33)

In other words Gascoigne could simply be a self-opinionated braggart.

Marsh also uses this novel to comment upon several of the other rather colonial features of the New Zealand environment in the 'thirties. The chief one centres around the uncomfortable trains on their narrow gauge tracks and Meyer's scrape with death which Alleyn is willing to attribute to "Some very tight footballer farther along the train" (II:21). Is Marsh caricaturing New Zealanders or (far worse) resorting to stereotypes in this connection? Marsh replies:

On a long journey it's very likely you will encounter boozy football players... It's what I would think if somebody came rushing into a carriage in a train and said he'd been kicked in the bottom. (32)

Marsh pokes at the New Zealand habit of requiring the approb-
ation of visitors. Alfred Meyer very tactfully exclaims to the waiting press, "By God, this is a wonderful country of yours..."

The reporters wrote busily the outlines for an article which would presently appear under the headline: "Praise for New Zealand: An Enthusiastic Visitor". (III:28)

Meyer likewise lies of necessity about the railway system (ibid, 30), and Alleyn remarks without disapproval of the defensiveness of these colonials:

They're an amazingly hospitable people, these New Zealanders, very anxious that one should admire their country, rather on the defensive about it, but once they accept you, extremely friendly. I am asked, embarrassingly and repeatedly, about "the accent" and don't know how to answer (XXV:222).

When the Australian actors joined the company it is noted that they "were on the defensive about English importations" (III:28); Marsh has also remarked that Australians and New Zealanders bear few resemblances:

We quite like each other: our common interests and our isolation from the rest of the world draw us together, but there's nothing New Zealanders enjoy less than being called Australians. Perhaps this is because we are insular and they are continentals.(34)

Interestingly, Marsh reserves real chagrin for a "smart Sydney tough" who "walked with a sort of hard-boiled slouch" (Artists in Crime [1938], IX:109) - the Australian student Watt Hatchett. The French art student Ormerin tells Alleyn that he likes Hatchett the "clumsy, shouting Australian" (AIC, XI:140), but Nigel Bathgate resents the cumbersome Hatchett's
"beastly argot... Half-American, half-Cockney", and lampoons him as an "Antipodean monster". Alleyn admits that the Australian dialect "is rapidly becoming Americanised" (AIC, X:116) but refuses to write Hatchett off. After Watt's damning display of Australianese, Fox declares that Australians always think "you're looking down on them" (X:115). This is tantamount to Marsh's own observation about New Zealanders whose inelegant mode of communication derives in part from a kind of self-consciousness linked to a fear of giving ourselves away. (35)

It was, after all, this very same sort of phenomenon which Samuel Butler's haughty evangelical traveller Biggs discovered; for there was no getting anything out of [the Erewhonians] if they scented even a suspicion that they might be what they call "giving themselves away". As there is hardly any subject on which this suspicion cannot arise, I found it difficult to get definite opinions from any of them, except on such subjects as the weather, eating and drinking, holiday excursions, or games of skill. (36)

The problem of the New Zealand accent is given further treatment in Colour Scheme where the object of critical attention is the "truculently colonial" and "defiantly uncouth" Simon Claire, the son of an English Colonel who had served in India (CS, I:15). (Notice how colonial and uncouth are almost equated in this description.) Dr Ackrington in particular loathes Simon's "awful accent" (I:18), which is well manifested in the following passage:

"Hullo Sim", said Barbara. "Lunch".
"Righto".
"How's the Morse code this morning?"
"Going good", said Simon.
Dr Ackrington instantly turned on him. "Is there any creditable reason why you should not say 'going well'?" he demanded.
"Huh!" said Simon. (One, III:20)

With the entrance of the voluble Maurice Questing the author is moved to remark that his conversation "was full of the near-Americanisms that are part of the New Zealand dialect" (Two, II:31). New Zealand now shares this disparagement formerly meted out to Australia, yet A R D Fairburn once made the very telling comment:

I have long been of the opinion that the natural attitude of mind of the New Zealander... should approximate much more closely to the American than to the English. We are both colonial.(37)

The pertinent question in Colour Scheme is asked of Barbara Claire by the Shakespearean actor Geoffrey Gaunt: "How have you escaped the accent?" (Four, IV:77) No answer is proposed but Gaunt dismisses Barbara as "incredibly gauche, she talks like a madwoman, and she grimaces like a monkey. That's simply because she's raw, uncertain of herself" (Five, III:90). Even though Barbara was born in India thirteen years before coming to New Zealand, she clearly has not entirely escaped the fate of Janet Frame's "Turnlung" ("raw, foreign..."). We later meet Simon, this time overloaded with that surfeit of colonial slang which Marsh has deprecated in earlier colonial novels ("You're nuts", "You're dopey", "Gee whiz, you're mad", "Aw, hell, you're mad as a meat axe", Six, II:105). When Simon talks to Dikon he explodes verbally into the "odious
expression" "Good-ow!" (Seven, II:119) which we came to associate with that unfortunate, brash Sydneysider Watt Hatchett. Here Marsh is dangerously close to regarding New Zealanders as adjuncts to Australians in the grosser aspects of their manners and speech.

The most crucial problem to confront is connected with McEldowney's disquiet at Ngaio Marsh's aloof disposition _vis-à-vis_ her fellow New Zealanders: why does she populate all her New Zealand settings either with visiting Englishmen (the Comedy Company in _Vintage Murder_) or those actually transported to this country (the Claires in _Colour Scheme_ and the Rubricks, Ursula Harme, Douglas Grace, and Fabian Losse in _Died in the Wool_)? Predictably the answer is tied up with our diction:

I think one of the difficulties I find in writing books with a New Zealand setting is that I write very largely in dialogue, and I'm afraid I do think by and large that the New Zealand dialogue is very monotonous and I do think that the average New Zealander has a very short vocabulary. It would be a difficulty for me - I would feel that my dialogue was getting very homogenous, that it was flat - running along the same lines and that would be difficult. New Zealanders all speak very much like each other. They haven't got many individual idiosyncrasies in expressing themselves. New Zealanders - not academic New Zealanders of course - but the ordinary New Zealander has got a very short vocabulary I think. (12)

The one pronounced fact about the Claires is their Englishness. Mrs Claire is concerned for the comfort of her new English guest (Mr Gaunt) and warns him that the mud pools
and geysers form "such a horrid place, really. When one thinks of our dear old English lanes..." (CS, Four, IV:72). In nearly everything she does, Mrs Claire makes it apparent that she lives spiritually at Home in England. This is vividly exemplified when she is seen bathing in a thermal pool reading a shilling edition of Mrs Gaskell's Cranford (One, II:17). Mrs Claire repeatedly attempts to exude the spirit of England upon this arid northern environment of thermal springs; on one occasion she looked as if she had "just returned from a round of charitable visits in an English village" (One, III:21) and later she and Barbara arrived home (no doubt from attending the local Anglican Church) and both "continued to disseminate an atmosphere of English Sunday morning" (Ten, VI:185). This façade has, we already know, persisted without adaptation for some twelve years (One, II:14), and Ackrington remarks to Dikon Bell that his sister Agnes "is something of a snob" (Two, IV:45). Finally, when Gaunt arrives at Wai-ata-tapu Springs, the Claires are described as grouping together "after the manner of an Edwardian Family portrait that had taken an eccentric turn" (Three, I:49). There seems to be nearly as much awkward self-consciousness in this portrait of these unrepentant Britons as we find in that of the uninspiring locals.

Marsh has made the point that she has never wanted to write "travelogue" fictions about New Zealand, yet is there
not an element of the postcard temptation about a story set probably at the Ngawha Hot Springs of North Auckland? In Colour Scheme Ngaio Marsh goes to great length to accent the primitive and hostile qualities of the landscape of the thermal regions, and understandably so, since an irritating oaf (who happens to be colour-blind) mistakes a red danger flag for a white one and slips over a bank to a gruesome death in a pool of boiling mud there. Maurice Richardson, reviewing this novel in The Observer, wrote that Colour Scheme provided yet another of Marsh's "lavishly described New Zealand settings"\(^3\), and although in this novel the impressions of the landscape do not come so frequently through the mind of Alleyn (disguised as Mr Septimus Falls for espionage purposes), Marsh does use the New Zealand expatriate Dikon Bell for a similar reason. However, one can firmly aqquit Marsh of any duplicity in her choice of the setting.

The novel opens with the vivid image of "the strangely primitive landscape" appearing to take shape "like a half-realised idea" (One, I:10); it is later described by the author as "freakish". The major landmark, Rangi's Peak, is an extinct volcano "so characteristically shaped that it might have been placed in the landscape by a modern artist with a passion for simplified form" (One, II:16).

Dikon Bell, the cerebral secretary to Geoffrey Gaunt, finds himself trapped in the predicament of the expatriate.
Like Ngaio Marsh herself during the war, Bell aches for England, yet is also spellbound by "a landscape aloof from man".

Its beauty was perfectly articulate yet utterly remote. Against his will he was moved by it as an unmusical listener may be profoundly disturbed by sound forms that he is unable to comprehend. He had travelled a great deal in his eight years' absence from New Zealand and had seen places famous for their antiquities, but it seemed to him that the landscape he now watched through the Claires' window was of an early age far more remote than any of these. It did not carry the scars of lost civilization. Rather, it seemed to make nothing of time, for it was still primeval and its only stigmata were those of neolithic age. Dikon, who longed to be in England, recognised in himself an affinity with this indifferent and profound country, and resented its attraction (Two, IV:39).

As Marsh wrote at the close of *New Zealand* (1942): it "is a country so young that it impinges on the very ancient, and its clear and primordial landscape reaches back to emotions that have nothing to do with civilization, but its spell - once felt - is not easily forgotten". Later, Dikon is again visited by a peculiar and oppressive "sensation of something primordial in which he himself [has] no part" when musing about the mud pools (Eight, III:144), and after the concert Bell thinks of the area as "like a lunar landscape...a lost world" (Nine, III:159). Alleyn (as Falls) remarks to Dikon that he too finds the ancient landscape "alien " (Nine, I:148).

The most dramatic comments on the terrain are conveyed via Gaunt, most memorably on the alarming ride into Wai-ata-tapu:

"For pity's sake, my dear Dikon, drive a little away
from the edge of the abyss. Can this mountain goat track possibly be a main road?"
"It's the only road from Harpoon to Wai-ata-tapu, sir. You wanted somewhere quiet, you know, and these are not mountains. There are no mountains in the Northland. The big stuff is in the South".
"I'm afraid you're a scenic snob. To me this is a mountain. When I fall over the edge of this precipice, I shall not be found with a sneer on my lips because the drop was merely five hundred feet instead of a thousand". (Three, I:47)

Gaunt notes that the hills possess "an air of the fabulous" (ibid,:48), adding "A marvellous backdrop" (:49) and telling Colonel Claire "your landscape reeks of theatre. One expects to hear the orchestra". Claire, so we learn, looks "baffled and slightly offended" (:50). When the narrator rather inexplicably refers to the sky as "pontifical" (Fifteen, I:253) we may wonder whether this is a special attribute of the antipodean climatology. But by 1970, when When in Rome was published, we need have no further doubts, because the motif of a "pontifical sky" recurs (WIR, 3, 1:58) and this makes more sense in Catholic Rome on this occasion.

If Ngaio Marsh has avoided the temptation to use our often imposing landscape as one of "many theatrical properties" how does she fare in her treatment of the Maori people? Do they come across as mere tourist appendages on an itemized list of distinctively local characteristics? This is especially interesting in that Dame Ngaio once observed that,
so few of our major writers have concerned themselves in depth with the greatest problem and surely the most interesting aspect of life in New Zealand today: the process of integration between two races and the emergence of many formidable difficulties that must be overcome before we can honestly claim to have realised the intention of our forefathers: that the Maori and Pakeha shall be as one people. (40)

"Pakeha New Zealanders cannot be described as a remarkably spiritual people. They are not given to introspection, and generally speaking there is little mysticism in their make-up". With this ruthlessly accurate summation of her own stock, Marsh pinpoints one source of that conflict of perspectives between Maori and European (most notably concerning the status and ownership of land), and this is a problem which she dramatizes very responsibly in Vintage Murder and Colour Scheme. It provides yet another example of progressive attitudes which give the lie to bland stereotypes about crime fiction's "inevitably" conservative bias.

Readers first encounter European indifference to religious values in the flirtatious conversation about Roman Catholicism that occurs between Miss Dacres and Hailey Hambledon ("I'm starved... How long is it since you've been to church or confession or whatever it is?"; VM, III:34). The real trouble starts when Roderick Alleyn presents Carolyn Dacres with a Maori tiki. Her husband, Meyer, then facetiously bows to the tiki for good luck, and Alleyn whispers to Dr Te P foiha "I half regret my impulse". Te P foiha's reply is significant:
"So may my great grandparents have laughed over the first crucifix they saw" (VM, IV:41). Of course, shortly after this scene Meyer is killed and, as Te Pokiha tells Alleyn, "The tiki is revenged" (XXII:202). George Mason (significantly Meyer's murderer) jokes irreverently about the Christian revelation of divine Grace - "There but for the wrath of God, or whatever it is?" (XXIV:215). Marsh implicitly vindicates the moral order when the blaspheming of tapu subjects returns with an unexpected irony upon these reckless and obtuse Europeans. Te Pokiha's account of the initial desecration of the tiki by a European (XXII:201) is a deftly handled piece of narrative.

Marsh has acknowledged that racial prejudices exist in New Zealand and stated on her American tour "that I have no Maori blood but would be proud of it if I did". Not surprisingly, Alleyn shares his author's respect for the Maori and when investigating a weapon collection in England on a homicide case four years later, we learn that he had sufficient interest to study Maori meres in New Zealand museums (Death and the Dancing Footman, XIII:212). One of Te Pokiha's laments about European colonization is that Maoris "have become a side-show in the tourist bureau - our dances - our art - everything" (XXII:198). Can it be that, in spite of her own honourable intentions, Ngaio Marsh has unwittingly used the Maori element as a virtual plot gimmick? As, for
example, when Alleyn and Miss Dacres returned from their confessional tête à tête and passed by a stock party of Maoris, "grouped on a ramshackle veranda, [who] grinned and waved" (XIX:175)?

The issue seems to focus around Alleyn's instinctive admiration for Te Pokiha, the Oxford-trained, pure-blooded Maori aristocrat with "the most exquisite manners" (XXV:222). Alleyn's attraction to Dr Te Pokiha is undoubtedly founded on respect, but that respect is itself clearly based upon the Doctor's presence and bearing:

Alleyn looked at the magnificent head. Te Pokiha was a pale Maori, straight-nosed, not very full-lipped. He might have been a Greek or an Egyptian. There was an aristocratic flavour about him - a complete absence of anything vulgar or tentative in his voice or his movements. (XXII:197)

Likewise, the author of Colour Scheme notes approvingly that Mrs Te Papa is "an old lady with an incredibly aristocratic head tied up in a cerise handkerchief" (CS, Eight, II:134). Yet Pokiha is taunted by Mason having been charged as a liar ("for God's sake don't go native", "keep off, you damn' Nigger!" XXIV:218) and Ackroyd had previously labelled Te Pokiha as "the black quack". Remembering the need for discretion ("I forgot there was no colour bar in this country"), Ackroyd superciliously altered his slander - "The light-brown medico was on-stage. That better?" (ibid, 214).

We have previously heard Te Pokiha summed-up by Wade;
that although athletic and brainy ("Best type of Maori"), the Doctor is only "ninety per cent civilised... See him when he goes crook!" (VII:63) True to form, Te Pokiha rises to the provocation, his lips coarsen "into a sort of snarl" (:217), his teeth show like a dog and the ever-suave Alleyn purrs, "By Jove, the odd twenty per cent of pure savage" (:218). Even today, allowing for the effects of inflation, it is difficult to account for this sudden ten per cent increase in savagery! It was this passage of Vintage Murder that so enraged Bill Pearson when he wrote about writers (usually not New Zealanders) who showed in their stories "that all Maoris, no matter how educated, are incomprehensible savages at heart".43 (Frame's "Edelman" is right: our New Zealand natives have not yet been "finished".)

Is Alleyn guilty of innocent snobbery in his attachment to Te Pokiha? Not really. Aside from their Oxford kinship, Alleyn is unquestionably motivated by a real respect for the Maori doctor. Yet as if to set the record straight, Marsh tries to present a less ambivalent portrait of a Maori rangitira in the next New Zealand story, Colour Scheme.

In this novel Ngaio Marsh has a deep reverence for Rua Te Kahu, a chief of the Te Rarawas. She is less successful at avoiding cliché with Huia, the memorable yet vaporous Maori help whose "voice was as cool and deep as her native forests"
In the person of Rua, Marsh wishes to create a symbol for the Maori people over a good stretch of time:

Rua himself had witnessed the full impact of the white man's ways upon a people living in a stone age. He had in turn been warrior, editor of a native newspaper, and member of Parliament. (Two, III:34)

Rua's father was a tohunga who had signed the Treaty of Waitangi and therefore Rua is a well-equipped figure to declaim on his "children", like the half-caste ("a bad pakeha-Maori" :37) Eru Saul. The only jarring note in Rua's commentary comes when he talks to Smith (the fifth-columnist) about the "evolutionary dyspepsia" (:38) experienced by the Maori people under European colonization. Marsh uses the story about European-induced diseases and injects scenes of the alcohol-entranced Maori youths in order to set the historical context. In this sense, one can argue that in these novels, Ngaio Marsh acted rather like an apologist for New Zealand customs and history. In a work of non-fiction, Dame Ngaio sketched the Maoris as a people who "float in and out of one another's houses, laugh, sing a lot, and love parties".

Their greatest enemy is alcohol. The Maori are particularly vulnerable to the effects of excessive drinking, cannot hold as much as Europeans, and, when they have taken too much, tend to become noisy, quarrelsome, and irresponsible. So, of course, do many white people, but in the Maori drinking is both more general and more dangerous to their over-all development.(44)
Chapter Eight ("Concert") is crucial in the handling of the Maori aspect. It is here that we meet Eru sniggering offensively at Mrs Claire's genteel exhortations for temperance and wholesome speech ("now Maui, why don't you speak nicely as you did when you used to come to Sunday School?" :130). Questing arrives, full of broad hints, and disparages Huia as Dorothy Lamour the Dusky Maiden (:132). Eru Saul and his gang are described predominantly in terms of the word "slouch" - we recall how the same verb was applied to Watt Hatchett from Sydney. At the concert, Marsh contrives to add an air of impending disaster both with the Maori song about Rangi's Peak, with its "icy undercurrent of horror" (:139), and Gaunt's chilling treatment of Macbeth's despairing soliloquy on death (Macbeth, V,V). All of this, on top of Gaunt's earlier recital from Measure for Measure (Claudio's speech in III, i) which Dikon realised had forced his listener "to think of death" (Seven, III:126), unerringly enforces a general mood in which Questing's death-scream shall fit accordingly - even meaningfully, in a melancholy sort of way.

At this point the significance of the story about the tapu settles in; Rua warns Smith about any searching for Rewi's toki (adze) in terms of the consequences of such sacrilege (Two, III:38). When Rewi's adze is found to have been removed from Rangi's Peak, Rua reduces himself (like Te Pokiha) to an apparently unaccountable frenzy. As Mrs Claire wistfully
comments, "Oh dear! One of those silly superstitions. Sometimes one almost loses hope. And yet, you know, he's a regular communicant" (Thirteen, II:228)! Rua later remarks that, "The reason may put on new garments but the heart and the blood are constant. From the shaft of the weapon there flows into my blood an influence darker and more potent than all the pakeha wisdom I have stored in my foolish old head" (Thirteen, III:233). This is not a piece of subtle racism (it is far less liable to misinterpretation than Alleyn's "odd twenty per cent of pure savage") and nor is Marsh using the Maori notion of tapu as a sensational bit of superstitious supernaturalism. The affair of Questing (the name being suitably ironic) in search of native booty serves as a deeply critical comment on the cupidity and lack of spiritual values of the European. Like Adam in Eden, Questing wantonly transgresses a recognized boundary and suffers the consequences.

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In Died in the Wool (1945) Marsh renews the attack on the New Zealand accent in the person of Cliff Johns. The novel abounds with accurate transcriptions of the dialect too numerous to detail, but Cliff tells Alleyn of his experiences as a farm manager's son who has obvious aesthetic aptitude, and who was nearly "taken over" as a surrogate son by the over-bearing Flossie Rubrick. Cliff waxes eloquent on the subject of accent:
"I liked the way she talked. A bit of an English accent. Crisp and clear and not afraid to say straight out what she thought without drawling "You know" after every other word. The first time she had me over here, I was only about ten and I'd never been inside the drawing-room... She began teaching me to "speak nicely" too (DIW, Eight, I:166)".

Marsh has herself located one of the prime attractions of "speaking nicely" in the aesthetic impulse. She uses a vivid simile:

In the dialect we have developed and are rapidly consolidating, we may be said to use these vocal facilities in the manner of a pianist wearing clown's gloves, keeping his foot on the soft pedal and, on the whole, despising the instrument he plays. (35)

In terms of the general pillorying of the linguistic defects of New Zealanders, Marsh sometimes contents herself with merely recording idiosyncratic and rather bizarre turns of phrase. For instance, in Colour Scheme and Died in the Wool we find the word "shickered" used (Six, I:100 and Eight, III:180 respectively) and the forthright expression "I'll knock your bloody block off" also recurs in both (Seven, II:114 and Eight, III:182) novels.

The broader strategy hones in on the philistinism and utilitarian bias of New Zealanders, as illustrated in Fabian Losse's remark that Cliff was for a time regarded as a "freak"; that "In this country, young men are judged almost entirely on their ability to play games and do manual labour" (DIW, Six, I:120). We are back with Biggs' complaint concerning the Erewhonians. Samuel Butler wrote even more plainly that out in
the Canterbury High Country it did not "do to speak about John Sebastian Bach's Fugues or pre-Raphaelite pictures." 

(Did Dame Ngaio have this passage in mind when she had Cliff Johns working on Bach's "Art of Fugue"?) In Marsh's own experience she came to know a tragic Russian émigré whom she called Sasha and who "became a ploughman and expected the hands on back-country farms to converse with beautiful peasant simplicity, about immortal longings, European literature and Grand Opera. When they responded but rudely to his overtures, he fought them". 

When Alleyn and P C Wetherbridge begin going through programme lists of the Listener this philistinism is comically pronounced in both senses of the word. Wetherbridge reads out the names of such appalling musical groups, "Syd Bando and The Rhythm kids", "Big Pink Momma" and "Jitterbugs". When Alleyn subtly indicates that this is not the kind of thing envisaged, Wetherbridge, unruffled, suggests:

"Old Melodies Made New?"
"Not quite. Carry on".
"..."8.25, Polonaise by Chopping but there's a lot more. Back", said Wetherbridge uncertainly, "or would it be Bark? The initials are J S. It's a pianna solo".
"Go on, please".
"The Art of Fewrie... It seems to have knocked off at 8.57". (Nine, II:193)

In Colour Scheme Geoffrey Gaunt is subjected to vigorous interrogation by Simon Claire - "He was not content to remain altogether silent, but would suddenly roar out strange inquiries and statements. He asked Gaunt whether he reckoned the theatre
did any good in the world and, when Gaunt replied with some heat that he did, inquired the price of seats" (Five, I:79)! This is a fine example of Marsh's intuitive sense of incongruity, a quality even more firmly evidenced in the treatment of the bumptious Questing whose delight is more than evident when Mr Falls arrives. Questing acts as "a sort of referee or ring master" between Falls and Gaunt: "'Here's our celebrated quest', I said, 'with nobody to provide him with the correct cultural stimulus until you came along!'" (Seven, III:123) Questing crassly admits that he is ignorant about theatrical matters, and Falls and Gaunt are both described as his "victims" (ibid, :124). That philistinism is not only a New Zealand affliction is underlined when Colonel Claire reacts to Gaunt's harrowing recital of Claudio's speech on death by referring to "theatrical poodle-fakin'" when he was a subaltern in India:

"They put me in one of their plays once. Damn' good thing. D'you know it? It's called Charley's Aunt" (:127

This transition from high tragic emotion to sheer farce is a brilliant example of the comic grotesquerie which is so characteristic of Marsh's entertainments. The highlight of Questing's seemingly fathomless imbecility is demonstrated after Gaunt's presentation of the speech before Calais (from Henry V) at the Concert. Questing assumes the dubious role of a voter of thanks:

It is unnecessary to give Mr Questing's speech in detail. Indeed, it is almost enough to say that it was a tour de force of bad taste, and that its author,
though by no means drunk, was, as Colly afterwards put it, ticking-over very sweetly... Mr Questing was, he said, returning thanks for a real intellectual treat but it very soon transpired that he was also using Gaunt as a kind of bait for possible visitors to the Springs. What was good enough for the famous Geoffrey Gaunt, he intimated, was good enough for anybody. Upon this one clear harp he played in divers keys while the party from Wai-ata-tapu grew clammy with shame (Eight, III:140).

With such evidences of literary talent, John Chamberlain wrote that "I, for one, would like to see Miss Marsh write a real book about the Claires".

The Claires and Dr Ackington are made so vividly real in the opening pages of "Colour Scheme" that I still want to know all about them. I'd like to learn the ultimate fate of the crazy spa near the impossible town of Harpoon. Could Colonel Claire raise the money to keep it going?... Will Simon ever get over his chip-on-the-shoulder feeling of inferiority? Alas for my desires, however, I never will know the destiny of the Claires, for Miss Marsh just had to make "Colour Scheme" into a mystery story, and the establishment of the Claires is just so much background for a spy hunt.(47)

Chamberlain's point is taken, but he mistakes the significance and status of these amiable eccentrics. The crucial feature about such eccentrics is that they are an essentially changeless tribe living in a timeless world. The other factor which this attitude tends to overlook is that the espionage aspect forms part of a developing logic in Ngaio Marsh's steadily improving novels of the nineteen-forties.
In *Surfeit of Lampreys* (1940) Marsh, writing out in New Zealand before the outbreak of war on September 3, 1939, dealt with her beloved London before that sober declaration. Thus it is that Henry Lamprey banters in typically English fashion about his enlistment in the Territorials:

"I can't tell you how much we dislike it but we stiffened our upper lips and bit on the bullets and when the war comes we know what we have to do" (SOL, Two, II:31).

Much later in the story, after two panicky servants have murdered Gabriel the Marquis of Wutherwood and Rune for gain, Henry jokes that he, "Earl of Rune, will take his place among the flower of England's manhood guarding an entrance to some vulnerable public convenience" (Eighteen, III:275). Although war has still not broken out at the end of this entrancing novel, readers are thrust into the prologue to the Battle of Britain crisis with the next, *Death and the Dancing Footman* (1941). This story is set in a Dorset country-house early in 1940 where a volatile party of competitors become snowbound for several days. The one regular chorus is "Oh, don't let's talk about this war" (DDF Four, II:57). The murderer Nicholas tries to leave on the pretence that "There's a war on" (VI, II:90) and, apart from several stray remarks about the blitz and listening to the war news on the radio ("it'll be worse in the air raids" [XI, II:180]), the characters show no significant awareness of what the war really means. Their utter isolation heightens the sense of "desert island" solitude. Near the end
of Death and the Dancing Footman, Alleyn thinks ahead somewhat ruefully, "Life's going to be pretty cheap when summer comes..." (XII, I:215).

Marsh at this time was sitting pretty out in "the comparative safety of New Zealand" 32, very much regretting that she could not be with her endangered English friends enduring the trauma of the Blitz. Thoughts of this nature, however, could not last for so very long. On February 15, 1942 came the much-feared surrender of Singapore: the Pacific front line of defence was rent asunder. Walter Nash had asked Britain's Air Marshall Sir Arthur Longmore as early as April 1939, "What do we do then to defend Australia and New Zealand when Singapore is gone and the fleet that comes after is smashed up?" Longmore replied, "I think the answer to that is to take to the Waitomo caves". 48 Fear of a Japanese invasion of New Zealand led to the appointment, in February 1942, of Walter Nash as the New Zealand Representative in Washington on the Pacific War Cabinet, chaired by President Roosevelt. Ngaio Marsh has written of the growing feeling of certainty "that the Japanese would mount a full-scale invasion against us".

We could hear and feel blasting under our hills where, it was rumoured, munitions were being secreted. Tank-stops went up along the Summit Road. A total blackout was imposed and by this time we were quite sure they would come.
A Lamprey cabled to me, "Don't forget Japanese mothers nurse their children for seven years". (49)

Therefore while Marsh felt Dikon Bell's longing to be back in
England and considered that she could not write truthfully of that land in the midst of the war, a new theme became apparent to her. There was a good deal more espionage occurring around the New Zealand coastline than is often remembered and several English specialists came to New Zealand in this connection. The fear was that New Zealand would be "easy meat" for the Japanese, who would then use this country as a base to mount an attack on Australia.

Therefore, Marsh decided to bring Alleyn out here on an espionage clue, on leave from his C.I. duties at Scotland Yard and under the aegis of Special Branch, for "three years' hunting" (Final Curtain, 9, II:137). The question of whether the Home Country could have spared him does not arise.

Dikon Bell, who all the way through Colour Scheme compared any considerations of espionage to the level of "arrow poison in a detective story" (Five, III:93), finally comes to see that,

"This war is changing the values of my generation. There are all sorts of things that we have thought funny that we shall never think funny again". For perhaps the first time he contemplated coldly and deliberately a possible invasion of New Zealand. As he thought, the picture clarified. An emotion long dormant, rooted in the very soil of his native country, roused in him, and he recognised it as anger. He realised, finally, that he could no longer go on as he was. Somehow, no matter how uselessly, he, like Simon, must go forward to danger. (Seven, IV:128)

This is an unexpectedly moving passage in its context, far from Chamberlain's suggestion of mere spy story exotica. In the
character of Dikon Bell, Marsh found a representative for a certain "temperament" of the New Zealand male: a focus for those forced to face the troubled issues of killing versus pacifism, patriotism, and democracy versus fascism. One recalls Randall Burdon's words in *New Zealand* (1942), where he wrote feelingly that,

> With Democracy on trial for its life, New Zealand may surely be called as an important witness for the defence. (50)

Marsh's touch is more certain in *Colour Scheme*, with her treatment of the "pall of depression that was in the background of all New Zealanders' minds at that time" (Six, I:95), although she is wary about over-stressing it. Through the boisterous Simon Claire comes the voice of despair, couched albeit defiantly, in nervousness:

> "if the old dead-beats at Home hadn't been too tired to take notice, perhaps we wouldn't have been looking so silly now" (Five, III:94).

Later, Dikon jibs Simon about his perpetual references to an undefined them, adding "Have we got anything approaching a secret service in New Zealand?" Simon recalls that a "big pot" is out from the Yard but cannot recall his name (Seven, II:120). In actual fact, *ad hoc* moves were made (on the recommendation of the UK Security Intelligence Organization) by the War Cabinet in establishing Major Folkes as Director of the new Security Intelligence Bureau in February 1941. F L W Wood comments:
The Bureau never seems to have functioned satisfactorily. Apart from the circumstance that Major Folkes himself seems to have been unsuited to his responsibilities and that many of his subordinates lacked at least the training necessary for them, War Cabinet does not seem to have appreciated the extent to which the Police Department was already discharging, in an unobtrusive way, the duties projected for the new organisation. The consequence was a duplication of effort, and friction between the SIB and the police. The Security Intelligence Bureau was, in fact, received with general uneasiness and distrust. (51)

A fiasco ensued in mid-1942 (i.e., around the time when Marsh was writing *Colour Scheme*), when a hoaxter convinced Bob Semple that,

four Nazi agents had arrived by submarine and were living in Rotorua, that contacts had been made with fifth columnists throughout the country and plans made for extensive sabotage and the assassination of leading cabinet ministers prior to the landing of an invasion force at New Plymouth. (51)

Clearly, with such intense rumours brewing amongst the War Cabinet, it was restraint rather than an improbable flight of fancy which led Ngaio Marsh to describe the crescendo of suspicion which followed the torpedoing of the Hokianga ("outward bound from New Zealand with a cargo of bullion for the United States of America") in *Colour Scheme* (Seven, I:113). Thus, when Alleyn has arrested a minor fifth-columnist, and talks off-handedly about "Hush-hush conversations with the PM and the commissioner and so on" (Fifteen, II:255), we can rest assured that this is not quite as unlikely as it seems.
(ii) Antipodean Sojourners

As the title of this discussion is "Antipodean Sojourners" it would be as well to offer an explanation for it. The strict and literal meaning of the word Sojourner is to dwell for a time as a temporary resident or stranger, not considering a given place as a permanent habitation. The concept is rich in biblical overtones, stretching back to when the Hebrew people sojourned in Egypt before their Deliverance, and forward into the New Testament as when the writer of Hebrews remarks on the patriarchs as "strangers, that they had no permanent place on earth" (Heb. 11:13). In Peter's first letter, the apostle appealed to his fellow "exiles of eternity and strangers in this world" (1Peter 2:11), and it is significant that Ngaio Marsh came from a city with its own venerable tradition of having been founded by Anglican pilgrims to a new land.

Of course, in the Marsh connection, the word must only be applied in its secular aspect and it can be related to Robin Hyde's notion of the Godwit who "has to fly north, whether he wants to or not". In Hyde's own explication of the metaphor, she dryly (and for our purposes, ironically) points to the dictionary definition of the godwit as "a kind of marsh bird":

(M)ost of us here are human godwits: our north is mostly England. Our youth, our best, our intelligent, brave and beautiful, must make the long migration, under a compulsion they hardly understand; or else be dissatisfied all their lives long. They are the godwits.
In all of the novels heretofore discussed, sojourners of one sort or another have appeared. The principal kind, in the early novels, is the English sojourner (Roderick Alleyn, the Comedy Company, Geoffrey Gaunt) whose stay is brief. In Died in the Wool we meet the first of those English who have chosen to stay on New Zealand terms - people like Flossie Rubrick, Ursula Harme and Fabian Losse. This, I shall show, is part of a developing and overlapping pattern (like so many others in Ngaio Marsh's life and writing) which undergoes many permutations. The antipodean motif turns full circle until Dame Ngaio writes with total equanimity about those New Zealanders who can live without a permanent orientation towards England. Marsh is herself, of course, the archetypal Sojourner: the person who can never give absolutely final allegiance to either New Zealand or England.

In Surfeit of Lampreys (1940) Ngaio Marsh gave fictional treatment to the position of the New Zealand expatriate in her portrait of the recently orphaned Roberta ("Robin") Grey. The cultural schism is primly delineated in the titles of the two opening chapters: "Prelude in New Zealand" and "Arrival in London". These phrases encompass the two most formative elements in the development of Dame Ngaio's personality, and even the sense of priority is captured superbly: the early life in the colony exists as a prelude to a more invigorating (and possibly permanent) connection with Mother England.
Marsh has always freely admitted that this novel was based on some members of the Rhodes Family, or rather that an English "Lamprey" had married a Rhodes and that was the New Zealand connection. Marsh adds that the "Lampreys" were the Rhodes' English and Irish relations, and that "The Rhodes Family are not in the least like the Lampreys!" Ngaio Marsh has written about the fascination which she found in this Kentish family:

doors opened into a life whose scale of values, casual grandeur, cockeyed gaiety and vague friendliness will bewilder and delight me for the rest of my days. If one can be said to fall in love with a family I fell in love with the Lampreys. It has been a lasting affair.(54)

The general affinities of circumstance between the real Rhodes family and the fictional Lampreys (life in a big country house in Canterbury, New Zealand, the financial crises, the return to England, the link with Kent) are quite apparent; it is even tempting to make parallels between, say, "Mike Lamprey" and Denys Rhodes for example. Yet of course, there are other quite strongly fictional embellishments, such as the idea that Robin met Frid (or Ngaio Marsh and Mrs Tahu Rhodes) at "Te Moana Collegiate School for Girls". The Lamprey farm at Mount Silver Station is called "Deepacres" (after the real Deepacres estate in Kent), a thirty mile drive out to the mountains. Marsh vividly conveys the dream-like quality of Roberta's initial attachment to this unconventional family, just as she will do nine years later with Martyn Tarne's
arrival in London (Opening Night, 1951). The descriptive
touches are sparing but evocative ("Roberta smelt native bush,
cold mountain water and wet loam... The smell of blue-gum
fires, of the oil that Lady Charles burnt in the drawing-
room, and of cabbage-tree bloom" (SOL, I:12&13) and, as a
reviewer in the Times Literary Supplement so ably put it, Miss
Marsh writes of this lively English family "with the zest for
England of one born and bred a long way away".\textsuperscript{55} However,
Roberta's fondness for the Lampreys is supposedly not related
to the fact that "in their queer way" they "were very grand for
New Zealand" (7, II:15). The Lampreys clearly live on the plains
of New Zealand's Canterbury (a fitting analogue to their own roots
in Canterbury, Kent), and the disguised names Little and Big
Mount Silver must refer to Big and Little Mount Peel in Acland
country at the edge of the turbulent Rangitata River. Shortly
after Roberta has been walking with Henry (the would-be Earl of
Rune) across the tussock, she scents the invigorating summer
mountain air and feels "contentment. This was her country".
The passage following is clearly important:

"Nice isn't it?", she said, tugging at a clump of tussock.
"Very pleasant", said Henry.
"But not as good as England?"
"Well, I suppose England's my country", said Henry.
"If I was there expect I'd feel the same about New
Zealand".
"I expect so. But you're only once removed from England,
and we're not New Zealand at all. Strangers in a strange
land and making pretty considerable fools of ourselves".
(1, II:17).

Henry unknowingly overlooks the antipodean's dilemma at this
time, so vividly expressed in The Godwits Fly: "You were English
and not English".56 These two chapters express, in condensed form, the fundamental elements in this sojourner motif: on the one hand the ill-adjusted Lampreys in New Zealand (whose "answer" to chronic insolvency is provided in the words of the twins' excited chorus: "we're going back to England") and on the other, Roberta Grey with no truly meaningful roots in New Zealand who shall (in the best tradition of earlier New Zealand novels) marry the English Henry of the gentry and, we assume, live more or less permanently in England.

Marsh invests Chapter Two with a good deal of her own emotional response to London, and the description of Roberta berthing after hearing names like Gravesend, Tilbury and Greenhithe on the voyage in parallels her own account of the same in Black Beech and Honey Dew. The shortness of this account betokens Marsh's own unwillingness to risk indulging her own emotions in a work of fiction. In that 1966 television interview, she stated:

I find a return to England immensely moving always... The coming into London really feels like coming Home to me. I can't explain - there are two homes I've got here and there. I do find in the Channel, at names like Goodwin Sands and Dungeness, my heart turns over always.(5)

It is not, then, surprising that Roberta's heart "thumped violently" (2, I:23) at her first sight of England. What is rather more surprising (though typical) is the haka which Henry and Frid perform on her arrival, not to mention their uproarious
antics with papier-mâché noses and false beards (2, II:27)! After disembarking, Roberta finds it difficult to make the connection between the final reality of the London cityscape and her own earlier romantic associations about it. Like Marsh, Robin could say, "My childhood dream of London is in some ways clearer in my memory than the events of that first morning: they, indeed, have a dreamlike, wavering quality".57 Robin passes the Strand (2, II:30) and Fleet Street; Henry asks her "Do you remember 'up the Hill of Ludgate, down the Hill of Fleet?'" (ibid, :29) and Marsh likewise quotes this rhyme in her autobiography.58 The final comment of note about this arrival concerns the author's view that "when they come to London, colonials orientate themselves by Piccadilly Circus... It is here at the place which he learns, with a rare touch of insolence, to call the hub of the universe, that the colonial wakes from the trance of arrival, finds his feet on London paving stones, and is suddenly happy" (2, II:33). With the acknowledged biographical parallel at hand, readers can begin to understand why this second chapter is so unerringly moving, for it is repeatedly touched with the feel of personal statement. That Alleyn cherishes fond memories of his recent sojourn in New Zealand (Vintage Murder) is stressed when he meets Roberta the day after her arrival and she wonders why "he looked so gently at her" (8, IV:113). When Alleyn and Fox later have to interview Roberta about the murder of the Marquis, the Chief Inspector asks about her origins and recalls his own
relish for the McKenzie Country ("Alleyn, stretched luxuriously on a widely-spread tussock, and looked across Lake Pukaki to where Aeorangi, the cloud-piercer, shone immaculate against the darkening sky" VM, "Epilogue":223) - "The sound of the names makes the places vivid again". Roberta succumbs and, "like all colonials, rose to the bait":

Her nervousness faded and soon she found herself describing the New Zealand Deepacres, how it stood at the foot of Little Mount Silver, how English trees grew into the fringes of native bush, and how English birdsong, there, was pierced by the colder and deeper notes of bell-birds and mok-e-moks. (SOL, 14, II:210)

We must restrain any yearning to relate this passage to Robin Hyde's parody of those who in their writing wish to "sit about singing to tuis and babbling of bellbirds"\(^{10}\), for there is no trace of such despised insularity in this splendid novel. Indeed, the entire story could without distortion be said to celebrate Roberta's exaltation and feeling of independence in a mass society, summed up in the heady phrase, "for Roberta was twenty and abroad in London" (17, I:270).

There may be one other carry-over from New Zealand in the novel, when Marsh describes the circumstances of the servant Giggle's death in the chapter entitled "Severed Hand". Detective-Sergeant Campbell tells Alleyn that the whole gruesome scenario is "like one of these damn-fool stories". Alleyn replies,"'The case of the severed hand?' (19, II:286.) One simply notes in passing Ngaio Marsh's own fascination with a New Zealand case of this type at Sumner, Christchurch in 1885.
and which she wrote about in an article which she called "The Hand in the Sand". 59

A memorable part of Surfeit of Lampreys concerns the precocious eleven-year old Mike Lamprey, who early in the piece demonstrates youthful forensic initiative ("Mike was looking in the playbox for that magnifying glass you gave him", says Patch, 9, II:130) and who forms the totally charming subject of Chapter Ten ("Statement from a Small Boy"). Marsh beautifully and wryly conveys her own love of children in the opening depiction of this "alarmingly innocent" little mite:

Alleyn sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm so sorry to rouse you up", he said civilly, "but you know what these cases are. One must follow the trail while it's fresh". Mike swallowed and then, with admirable nonchalance, said: "I know". (10, I:133).

Michael forms a connecting link between Surfeit of Lampreys and Opening Night, but only after we have seen him as a Scotland Yard recruit in Marsh's second novelette, "I Can Find My Way Out" (1946). This story is in many ways a "trial run" for the novel Opening Night (1951), and Michael (now a Lord) provides further examples of that childlike love of clowning which is such a Lamprey characteristic. Having taken Alleyn's CID card to get him into the opening performance of a Fellow Etonian's first play, Mike Lamprey assumes the disguise of a delivery man, feigning a lower-class Cockney accent ("Fanks... Chilly, ain't it?" 60) and in so doing, revealing more of the Lamprey penchant for deception. As Lord Michael has managed
to inadvertently drop in amidst a theatrical murder case, Roderick Alleyn has good occasion to chide him: "Irresponsible gaiety doesn't go down very well in the service, Mike. You behaved like a clown". 61

In Opening Night, P C Lamprey makes his final appearance in Marsh's fiction. We encounter him on this occasion in the normal course of his duties and, after Fox asks him to escort the wise Martyn Tarne to be interviewed by Alleyn, Lamprey remarks on overhearing that Martyn came from New Zealand. Miss Tarne had already "wondered disjointedly if constables of P C Lamprey's class were a commonplace in the English Force" and she muses about whether he "could have been the son of a former governor-general". Lamprey tells her that his family "had a place out there on a mountain" and that he expects that "a legend of lunacy has survived us" (ON, IX, II:155). As he had done with Roberta Grey, Alleyn takes an interest in the fact of Martyn's New Zealand origins (ibid:158) and again finds that this releases her inhibitions in talking about the crime.

No attempt is made on Marsh's part to overlook the prior existence of "I Can Find My Way Out" and its many parallels with this novel (murder by gassing, the overseas playwright [the Ukranian Ben and Otto Brod], Michael Lamprey, and the drunk actor theme [Cann Cumberland and Clark Bennington]); for the
likeable and homely Fred Badger asks Martyn, "Don't tell me you never 'eard abaht the great Jupiter case! Don't they learn you nothing in them anti-podes?" (I, III:19) The only other reference to this case is made in a remark by Alleyn to Detective-Sergeant Gibson (VII, III:115).

Martyn Tarne is a nineteen year-old New Zealander with some experience as an actress in an English touring company in New Zealand a year previously, who then went with them on to Australia. Martyn has only been in London a fortnight but had succumbed to fatigue and desperation after having no success in finding a job before becoming a dresser at the modern Vulcan Theatre in Carpet Street. The sub-plot centres on her more than passing physical resemblance to the leading male (and matinée idol) Adam Poole who had himself toured New Zealand with Clark Bennington, among others, some twenty years ago. Members of the cast not unnaturally begin to connect her to Poole; in the flavoursome words of the drunken Bennington, Miss Tarne is seen as "m'wife's lover's little by-blow" (III, III:53). The designer Jacques Doré had earlier remarked about Poole and "the wrong side of the rose bush" (III, I:47), but Poole manages to find out that the mother of this South Islander from the high country was an old cousin of Poole's father (:55). Not too surprisingly, Martyn begins to establish her talent as an actress and it is hinted at the end of Opening Night that, again, another spirited New Zealand girl will wed an established and
well-heeled Englishman. It is worth noting in passing that Miss Tarne's father was killed on Crete in the Second World War (i.e., about six or seven years previously), and we recall Roberta Grey's sudden loss of both parents in a car crash (SOL 3, II:42). Is this mere coincidence, does it serve as a plot contrivance, or is Ngaio Marsh making a somewhat unconscious comment on the emotional disablement of New Zealanders? There can be no doubt about one thing: these tragic backgrounds contribute to a real severance of antipodean ties (curiously neither of these girls mention brothers or sisters), ties which are in turn replaced by English ones. In short we have here the makings of a highly symbolic pattern.

In Death at the Dolphin (1967) Marsh writes about Peregrine Jay, a New Zealand-born playwright, who was educated there and "had come to England on a drama bursary and had remained there" (DAD 2, II:40). Jay (a ridiculously unlikely name for a New Zealander!) is clearly a kind of modified John Elsom or James Laurensen figure. The only other reference to Jay's "New Zealandness" occurs before the murder and just before his new play The Glove is launched at the Dolphin Theatre. Jay awakes early on the big morning and lets "himself out into London":

Big Ben and all the clocks in the City struck eight and Peregrine's heart's blood rose and pounded in his ears. The glory of London was upon him. A kind of rarefied joy possessed him, a trembling anticipation of good fortune that he was scared to acknowledge. He was piercingly happy (4, VII:93).

The only other time in which Marsh has referred to this exalt-
ation concerns Mr Whipplestone when finding a quaint new home for himself after retiring from the foreign office:

He had begun to feel less depressed. Persons who do not live there will talk about 'the London feeling'. They will tell you that as they walk down a London street they can be abruptly made happy, uplifted in spirit, exhilarated. Mr Whipplestone had always taken a somewhat incredulous view of these transports but he had to admit that on this occasion he was undoubtedly visited by a liberated sensation (Black As He's Painted [1973] One, I:15).

Dame Ngaio often stated that unless she visited London she never felt quite that she was in England, and loved the sense of rapture walking down London streets; the sense of magic was often accentuated in springtime. Evidently this is a feeling not only reserved for colonials, however.

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One of Ngaio Marsh's acknowledged strengths as a writer is her superb, descriptive sense of the visual. Is it not surprising, therefore, that a columnist in John O'London's Weekly should review Died in the Wool with the remark that it "is a change from the usual American[!] background" and that in it Alleyn journeys out to "Australia"? Clearly the reviewer is not truly familiar with Marsh's stories, yet there is a small problem with her writings and that is connected with the tendency to almost mythologize many of the settings by disguising them. This tendency is marked in the New Zealand stories where "Middleton" is an imaginary town, Mount Silver
and Wai-ata-tapu are geographical "pseudonyms", and in the case of Died in the Wool the Mackenzie Country farm is abstracted into Mount Moon. Marsh has written vividly of this invigorating environment that the air "is iced champagne, the sky an emperor's mantle, and the sunshine hot and handsome". Does she manage to convey these details in the novel without any fundamental uncertainty or ambivalence?

The opening description of the Mackenzie Country is extraordinarily vivid for all its compression, and it provides an extremely memorable portrayal of a contradictory nor'wester in the Burkes Pass region, with the "black cones" and the black cloud withdrawing like a curtain and with air "clear beyond belief, unbreathed, one would have said, newly poured out from the blue chalice of the sky" (One, I:15). The scenic highlight in this novel is Mount Cook, the cloud-piercer. The only jarring suggestion comes with Alleyn's surprise at these mountainous sights considering that he last saw them in Vintage Murder (admittedly seven years earlier in the stated chronology). Alleyn finds New Zealand's to be a "clear and uncompromising landscape" (One, II:30) but even in the midst of this rugged antipodean setting a mode of Englishness prevails in the form of the Mount Moon homestead:

Victorian gables and the inevitable conservatory, together with lesser family portraits and surplus pieces of furniture traced unmistakably the family's English origin. The garden had been laid out in a nostalgic mood, at considerable expense, with a bland disregard for the climate of the plateau (One, III:30-31).
Much is made of "the pageant of nightfall" as it relates to Mount Cook (:31); what is described as the mountains' "nightly pageant of violet and gold" (Eight, III:179). Nor does Marsh neglect the smell of wood-smoke (Seven, I:142) or the clear and cold frosty conditions of the area (Nine, III:196-97). Joan Stevens has noted that in these New Zealand stories "the local possibilities are most skilfully manipulated"\(^6\), and this chapter has attempted to show that Marsh avoided what Cliff Johns, with what appears as affected eloquence, calls in the musical context "the introduction of native bird song and Maori hakas into an ersatz symphony" (Seven, III:161). The essence of Ngaio Marsh's strategy has fitted in with her own 1934 critical canon of understating the local peculiarities. Can Joan Stevens be right in her statement that the New Zealand novels are not Marsh's best: "Are we too lacking in wit, too puritan, too comfortably conformist, to make good subjects for a 'nice murder'?"\(^6\) Thirty-three years later, Marsh wrote another New Zealand murder setting in "Morepork" (1978), her fifth and most recent novelette. Julian Symons has written of the "beautifully evoked New Zealand setting" in this short story\(^6\) and, like the passages on Roberta Grey's arrival in London, there is a considerable weight of personal recollection in it. This piece is reminiscent of Marsh's writings about her own summer holidays in the Glentui area where she and a friend often slept out under the trees, and the tone of the story is well summed up in this passage
from Black Beech and Honey Dew:

Moreporks called to each other across the valley, sounding very lonely in silence that was compounded of small rustling movements, unnoticed by day and the undertone of hurrying water. (66)

The story is set in a National Park region near the fictional Wainui River at the foot of the Southern Alps. It is a superbly constructed tale and the highlights come from the richly textured sense of locale which Ngaio Marsh has managed to convey. Yet here again she cannot do without an Englishman in the person of Miles Curtis-Vane, the one Briton in a party of Kiwi deer-stalkers and whose clothes, although "well-worn, had a distinctive look which they would have retained if they had been in rags". (Clearly, a Jaeger's or Harrod's customer!) Curtis-Vane stands a breed apart from the sturdy New Zealanders like Bob Johnson, and when the leading lady (Susan Bridgeman) arrives after learning that her estranged husband has died (note the irony of their surname) after falling off a jerry-built bridge into the treacherous Wainui (a snow-fed river), she instinctively settles for Curtis-Vane, like her son Clive, to render general thanks to the group. Stevens must, on this showing, be correct in her assertion that New Zealanders alone and in themselves are too limiting to provide a "rattling good murder-yarn".

The setting is pure Glentui: what with bellbirds, tuis, the rustling river, the black beech and beech-bush, not to mention the native wood-pigeon which flops (a perfect descrip-
tion) on the ridge-pole of Caley Bridgeman's tent. The nearest approach to eccentricity comes in the person of this bird-song fanatic and the taxidermist, David Wingfield. At the end of this fiendishly ingenious plot we learn that the Maoris regarded the Morepork as, in the recorded words of the deceased, "a harbinger of death". For the plain fact is that these tense campers are totally out of step with this near paradisal (yet deceptively treacherous) environment. Marsh could write glowingly of her own father, that he was "magnificent" when camping "in his natural element and seemed to give off a glow or profound satisfaction". The characters in "Morepork", on the contrary, are seen to harbour sub-surface passions of resentments: from the lovers Solomon Gosse and Susan Bridgeman to the Oedipal anxieties of Clive Grey and the ruction between Wingate and Caley Bridgeman. (Who said New Zealanders are too conformist and dull to provide interesting fictional treatment?) These characters are infiltrators, and violence is the inevitable manifestation of their intense jealousies and hatreds. The murderers, Gosse and Mrs Bridgeman, over-reach themselves and the solution to the mystery hinges (as it did in Marsh's first novelette "Death on the Air" [1939]) on a piece of technical apparatus. The two illicit lovers speak their murderous intent in the bush away from the camp, but not away - alas - from the range of Caley Bridgeman's highly sensitive parabolic microphone. This story is only the second in Marsh's entire career in literary detection (the first being "A Pool About Money"
A prerequisite in the writing of "Morepork" was Julian Symons' insistence that all stories in the volume had to in some way involve a makeshift or otherwise trial by jury. Marsh handles this requirement with typical aplomb yet this situation does force out the only slightly tedious passages in the work. This necessity creates yet another occasion for the unequipped colonials to defer to an Englishman; Gosse leaves it for Curtis-Vane the barrister to set up the terms of reference and to run the inquiry:

He took out a pad of writing-paper from his pocket, laid a pen beside it and put on his spectacles. It was remarkable how vividly he had established a court-room atmosphere.(71)

It is with the ensuing dramatization of the "trial" that Marsh falters and the atmosphere soon falls to a kind of melodramatic brinkmanship inclusive of trembling men who display hauteur and act "insecurely", "wearily" and in "high dudgeon" at one point. One the credit side, however, Dame Ngaio for only the second time in her writings about New Zealand, quotes the characteristic expression "She'll be right" and uses other peculiar idiom like "gang of yobs", "Gidday", and "By Cripie". 72

Ngaio Marsh also chose to set her most recent novel (unpublished at the time of writing and probably titled Photofinish or Dead Image) in New Zealand. Troy, after losing her husband to the Antipodes during the war (cf. Final Curtain) and having
met rather uncouth representatives of New Zealand such as Sydney Jones (Last Ditch [1977]), finally gets the opportunity to visit this singular country when a rather imposant cosmopolitan asks her to come and stay at his lodge here in order to paint his portrait. Troy, predictably for an accomplished portrait painter, accepts and in the second chapter ("The Lodge") the Alleyns are met on a fine spring morning in New Zealand and driven to this potentate's island Lodge on the West Coast at Lake Waihoe (modelled loosely on lakes Brunner and Moana). They are carried "along roads that might have been ruled across the plains to vanishing points on the horizon". Alleyn asks his wife if she would care to paint the scene:

"I don't think so", she said after considering it. "It's all a bit inhuman isn't it? One would have to find an idiom. I get the feeling", said Troy, "that the people only move across the surface. They haven't evolved with it. They're not included", said Troy, "in the anatomy. What cheek! to generalize like this when I've scarcely arrived in the country" (Typescript, p.19).

When the party approaches the Lodge they pass by rugged waterfalls and look down at a river (into which a car fell some years earlier) "as if from a gallery in a theatre on an audience of tree-tops" (Typescript, p.21). Marsh has gone to great lengths in this novel to cut out originally long descriptive passages of "scenic" padding, yet she had left herself open to bringing the painter out here in Died in the Wool when Alleyn told the recalcitrant Cliff Johns that he was curious about expressing "this extraordinary landscape" in terms of
music and paint. "'I don't understand music, you see', Alleyn went on. 'But paint does say something to me'."

(DIW, Seven, III:160.) Thus, the logical question "Would you care to paint?" in the new novel, for Alleyn is dying to see what his talented wife will make of - in Darwin's words - "these Antipodes".

In "A Fool About Money" (1974), which Frederick Dannay ("Ellery Queen") rather lavishly introduced as a "chuckling (and in its own way, chilling) cocktail-party story that could easily become a legend in its own time", Dame Ngaio wrote about a startling event which occurred in New Zealand to a newly-arrived English couple, Harold and Hersey Hancock. This is a short, but psychologically subtle, vignette concerning Mrs Hancock's first rail journey down the coast of the South Island from Christchurch to Dunedin. Marsh is always in good form when writing of train journeys due to her own love of rail travel and, although any descriptive touches are sparely administered, as with the admirable extended description of Alleyn's train journey to Middleton (Vintage Murder, I), the author exactly conveys the sensations of travel:

In the world outside, plains and mountains performed a grandiose kind of measure and telegraph wires leaped and looped with frantic precision. (74)

Marsh includes real details, such as regular comfort stops and the attendant "assaults" on the catering facilities in the railway stations. Although the chief source of interest for
the plot developed all because Harold had to hurriedly leave his departing wife for a toll call from London, there are no ingratiating comparisons between the accents and behaviour of Hersey Hancock and the New Zealander Mrs Fortescue, except that the latter makes great use of the word "actually".

It can be clearly seen that New Zealand has provided Ngaio Marsh with a varied ambience for her detective stories, although Howard Haycraft was surely correct when he wrote that occasionally Marsh's "fondness for her native 'Down Under', amusing enough in small doses, leads her dialogue to become somewhat unintelligible to the untutored reader". Haycraft has however obviously mistaken Marsh's cutting satire on New Zealand speech for an attraction to it.) Indeed, it can be argued that all the New Zealand settings provide analogues to the conventional English village setting, in that Middleton, Wai-ata-tapu, Mount Moon, the Wainui River area and Lake Waihoe all fulfil the basic requirements set down by W H Auden. Writing of the milieu for detective fiction, Auden stated the need for a "closed society so that the possibility of an outside murderer...is excluded; and a closely related society so that all its members are suspect". Auden gives as examples "the closely knit geographical group (the old world village)" and "the occupational group (the theatrical company)". Marsh has used both these types (the first in Colour Scheme, Died in the Wool, "Morepork" and Photofinish and the second in
Vintage Murder) to good effect, although any slavish doctrinaire or theoretical intent.

(iii) The Tranquil Village: or the 'Mess on the Carpet'.

Ah God! to see the branches stir
Across the moon at Granchester!
To smell the thrilling-sweet and rotten
Unforgettable, unforgotten
River-smell, and hear the breeze
Sobbing in the little trees.
...Oh, is the water sweet and cool,
Gentle and brown, above the pool?
And laughs the immortal river still
Under the mill, under the mill?
Say, is there Beauty yet to find?
And Certainty? and Quiet kind?
Deep meadows yet, for to forget
The lies, and truths, and pain?...oh! yet
Stands the Church clock at ten to three?
And is there honey still for tea?

-Rupert Brooke
The Old Vicarage, Grantchester
(Café des Westerns, Berlin, May 1912).

What is the attraction of an English village setting for writers of detective fiction? Auden hinted that it most approximates to an Eden in our world, for the more Edenic the Great Good Place he says, "the greater the contradiction of murder".

The country is preferable to the town, a well-to-do
neighbourhood...better than a slum. The corpse must
shock not only because it is a corpse but also because,
even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place, as
when a dog makes a mess on a drawing room carpet.(79)

In most "straight" detective novels settings are incidental
to the crime; Ngaio Marsh, beginning a novel with people has
then to find a suitable milieu for the main characters and yet
does provide some memorable descriptive sequences. It is this
which Erik Routley found characteristic of Marsh's work:

When you look over her output between 1935 and 1970
what you chiefly remember is pleasant characters and
pleasant situations - nice English places, friendly
London comers, agreeable English people, inviting New
Zealand scenes. You remember with more difficulty
and searching who was murdered and why, and what kind
of pressure the murderer was under. Not that you aren't
told, and told quite fairly, all these things. They
simply don't seem to be their author's preoccupation.(80)

Routley is correct: for Marsh the people determine the
locale, but her interest is in both.

The great advantage for a detective novelist in a country
village lies in the fact that the author does not have to portray,
in Marsh's words, "too wide a screen"81 and that with small
groups a restricted range of characters can be isolated. This
principle is vividly exemplified in Death and the Dancing Foot-
man (1941) where the isolation and enforced combination of
several volatile people in a Dorset country house allows their
subliminal tensions and underlying anxieties to surface and
lead infallibly to a crime of violence.

Village settings are a hallmark of classical detective
fiction (Miss Marple at Mary St Mead parish affording an example) and Colin Watson writes of these stories belonging to what he calls "the Mayhem Parva school". The village in this little world,

would have a well-attended church, an inn with reasonable accommodation for itinerant detective-inspectors, a village institute, library and Shops - including a chemist's where weed killer and hair dye might conveniently be bought. (82)

Watson also labels Mayhem Parva as "a mythical kingdom, a fly-in-amber land". 83 Dame Ngaio's portrayal of English villages has many affinities with the unique writings of E F Benson (particularly Lucia in London [1927]). Benson's Riseholme, where "Lucia" Lucas reigns as Queen of an old-style Elizabethan village, possesses an unmistakeable air of that venerable eccentricity which one comes to associate with fiction about small English hamlets (e.g., through Benson's Colonel Boucher, Daisy Quantock and Georgie Pillson).

Marsh's own knowledge of English villages comes first-hand and she shares the reverence for them that Margery Allingham so lovingly lavished upon her own native "Auburn" (East Anglia) in her book The Oaken Heart (1941). Allingham's book very faithfully described the tenor of life in such a village during the Second World War, with its own forge, pubs, local cricket games, maypole and Church, School and train. At the end of the book, Allingham wrote that:

Auburn is a right thing and will survive all wrong
things... The main thing about Auburn, curled round
the maypole, is that it is ordinary country, no better
and no worse than anywhere else. (84)

In her third detective novelette, "Chapter and Verse:
The Little Copplestone Mystery" (1973), Ngaio Marsh used a
village setting in which a New Zealander (or an Englishman
who lived there for some time - whichever is not established)
and "New Zealandness" plays a crucial role in the solution
of a triple murder mystery.

The Alleyns have a cottage in "Little Copplestone", Kent. One day a Mr Timothy Bates telephones Troy, telling
her that he had met Alleyn out in New Zealand and "he did say
that if I ever came home I was to get in touch". 85

Later in this intriguing story the murderess Mrs Simpson
calls Mr Bates a "Typical New Zealander" and evidences a famil­
liarity with the size of New Zealand whitebait 86 while pretend­
ing to be an untravelled Briton. As in Death in Ecstasy,
Alleyn sends cables for tell-tale clues but what is interesting
about this story is the fact that Mrs Simpson left England for
New Zealand after murdering three people in this Kentish village.
Bates bought her ancient Bible (containing cryptic ciphered
clues to the murders) from her out there and, on visiting
the Alleyns at Little Copplestone, precipitated her exposure
by conducting genealogical inquiries. (Bates get himself
The village itself conforms to type and little space is wasted in this short story concerning its description. The Church (St Cuthbert's) is an ancient edifice and its rector, predictably, is "an authority on village folklore". At the time of the story a Harvest Festival is in the offing and Marsh has also created several local eccentrics like the prim and prudish Miss Hart, the atheistic Richard De'ath and the deaf verger and town-crier William Pilbrow, who indelicately exults over Alleyn's sleuthing: "Murder's the game, is it? What a go! Come on gents, let's have it. Did he fall or was 'e pushed? Hor, hor, hor!"88

The fact that the church is the focal point of the community in such villages is subtly stressed when we learn that Troy attends church for the Festival - something she would not normally do. Malcolm Muggeridge has written of the place of the Church in England:

In an average English village today Anglican worship has become little more than a dying bourgeois cult. A small cluster of motor-cars may be seen outside the parish church when a service is in progress; the bells still ring joyously across the fields and meadows on Sunday mornings and evenings, but fewer and fewer heed them, and those few predominantly middle-class, female and elderly. It never occurs to most villagers that the Church is anything to do with them, apart from the need for baptism, marriage and burial; three ceremonies which continue for no discernible reason, to draw them to church.(89)

The church's function in such an indifferent setting is to be
the triumphant guardian of English tradition and several feudal assumptions of the local communities it serves. Some commentators have spoken about the church buttressing a mythology consisting of country fêtes and Edwardian evening parties and which effectively calls for the upholding of privilege and recalls the old hierarchy of Squire, Vicar and the Yeoman farmers.

With "Chapter and Verse" Marsh has written a total of five novelettes and the "recipe", as it were, is two with explicitly New Zealand settings ("Fool About Money" and "Morepork"), two with a totally English orientation ("Death on the Air" and "I Can Find My Way Out") and one hybrid ("Chapter and Verse"). Inevitably, it seems, the pattern repeats itself.

New Zealanders also appear in two novels set on Islands, Dead Water (1964) and Last Ditch (1977).

In the former, the object of attention is an unmarried New Zealander, Jenny Williams, staying in a Cornish fishing village called the "Island" of Portcarrow:

The Island was incorrectly named: it was merely a rocky blob of land at the end of an extremely brief, narrow and low-lying causeway which disappeared at full tide and whenever the seas along that coast ran high. The Island was thus no more than an extension of the tiny fishing village of Portcarrow... In those parts they talked of "islanders" and "villagers" making a distinction where none really existed (DW, 1, II:9-10).
Jenny Williams is a temporary schoolmistress at Portcarrow and is studying for postgraduate purposes in England. The story centres around two miracle cures which are not able to be debunked, and of the ensuing attack of unwholesome media attention which turns the "Island" into a tourist nightmare.

Predictably Miss Williams engages the attention of one Patrick Ferrier, a young Oxford gent. Major Barrimore admits to liking her "If you can stomach the accent" (1, IV:22) and indeed Patrick corrects her diction in a rather uncompromising (yet flirtatious) manner:

"Don't say 'Ow Pettrucky'.
"Shut up".
"Well, you asked me to stop you. And it is my name".
"All right. Ae-oh, Pe-ah-trick, then". (:24.)

Patrick later quotes the Kiwi aphorism "She'll be right" (2, II:42) to his mother and Alleyn tells Jenny about Miss Emily Pride's Resi stance work with some "kiwis" (8, I:177).

In Last Ditch, a novel set in the imaginary fishing village of Deep Cove in the Channel Islands (a modified Jersey setting), the Alleyns' talented son Ricky, now a "terribly young don" through his "fists and glories" in the words of Jasper Pharamond (I, I:12), meets a certain Sydney Jones. Jones is a New Zealand-born painter of mean talent who in fact turns out to be involved in international drug trafficking and who nearly falls over himself wanting to meet Agatha Troy. Ricky, finding Syd Jones to come from New Zealand, can thus account "for certain habits of speech" (II, II:32), and Jasper comments that Jones is a
partner in shame to the loose Dulcie Harkness "and the father of her unborn babe" (36). Syd is shown not to be a reticent fellow with his unexpected outburst of the word "shit" (II, V: 49), yet when he visits Troy, Jones reverts to the state of an awe-struck colonial, reduced to inarticulate gap-fillers like "Aw" and "Yar" (III, I:52). Troy soon spots that this sweaty specimen is an over-wrought drug addict and it transpires that he has been coerced by this addiction to lend aid in illicit drug dealings from the coast of France. Troy's final comment on this wayward antipodean is to call him "egregious" and "a compulsive boor" (IV, III:91).

Another antipodean raises his dubious head in Grave Mistake (1978): the undelicious Claude Carter ("Charmless Claude" in Verity Preston's words [II, I:33]) who has arrived from Australia as a steward on the ship Poseidon. Alleyn describes Carter to Fox as "the archetype of all remittance-men" (IV, I:96). In Fox's terms he has had,

a sussy record. He had been mixed up, as a very minor figure, in the drug racket. In his youth he had served a short sentence for attempted blackmail. He was thought to have brought a small quantity of heroin ashore from SS Poseidon (V, III:141).

This fool later attempts to blackmail Sybil Foster's murderer and ends up as a veritable gargoyle sharing her grave (IX, II: 241); such is the fate of the colonial would-be criminal when exposed to European guile. As Roderick Alleyn noted on another occasion and context, "The Dominions are, on the whole, both
tolerant and helpful" (Spinsters in Jeopardy 12, V:254). Perhaps too much so.

Raymond Williams has written that "the true fate of the country-house novel was its evolution into the middle-class detective story". Because the focus in the country-house novels of Dame Ngaio Marsh (e.g., A Man Lay Dead, Death and the Dancing Footman, Final Curtain, Hand in Glove and Tied Up in Tinsel) is almost totally upon the people at the houseparty, I shall not dwell on them in this chapter.

The kind of features which define the pure village settings were ably summarized by Ferdinand Tönnies in his pioneering study, Community and Society - Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft (1887; rpt Michigan State University Press, 1957). In Tönnies' terms, Geimenschaft society is community-based; it forms a cohesive social unit bonded by shared norms and values and commanding strong allegiance from its members. This type of social structure is best represented by the old rural peasant village and, in Howard Becker's view, it can be labelled a "sacred" society in that "it is characterized by primary group relations, by allegiance to tradition, and by belief in supranatural entities. A secular society, like Tönnies' Gesellschaft, is characterized by rationalism,
science, and perpetual innovation". In discussing the urban world of England in the 1920's, Malcolm Bradbury wrote that the 'twenties period was "behaviourally modern"; conduct was for the first time,

that of men emancipated and exposed by the forces of a gesellschafter society, that modernized and urban-centred environment, secular, mobile, heterodox, in which experience is constantly varied, society seems less like a community than an impersonal crowd, men are constantly compelled to create and recreate their identities, their aspirations, their values. (92)

It was a fine touch of Marsh's to write about both types of society (those of real community: mere association governed by self-interest) in her seventh novel, *Death in a White Tie* (1938). This novel focuses upon the upper-class world at the height of the "London Season". Lady Alleyn prepares to launch her débutante niece (Sarah Alleyn) into the heady delights of this world, and the setting bears some resemblance to Henry James' *The Awkward Age* (1899) in this regard.

Death in a White Tie is one of Marsh's weakest stories overall, but it contains an enchanting chapter (XXV: "Benefit of Clergy") when Alleyn and Fox drive to a Buckinghamshire village which is described as "small and rather self-consciously picturesque" (:213). This is all that is stated about Barbicon-Bramley because the interest lies in the delightful old rector, the Rev. Walter Harris and his wife who, after a number of fits and starts, manage to confirm several facts for Alleyn. The description of two rumps up-ended in their cottage garden and
of the rector's study ("He hurriedly gathered up from the chairs, parish magazines, Church Times and seed catalogues" :215) is well handled, ringing perfectly true.

It was not until her next novel, Overture to Death (1939), that Marsh wrote entirely about an English village. Coming from a country lacking well-established social cohesion (vividly attested to in Butler's romance about our topsy-turvy land in Erewhon), it is scarcely surprising that Ngaio Marsh would derive much fascination from well ordered village communities with the comfort of the Church, an almost ritualistically ordered life pattern and intimate communal ties. Tönnies characterized this Gemeinschaft environment along the lines of a "folk society" defined by its mechanical solidarity, a simple homogeneity and the maintenance of status hierarchies and traditionalism in general.

Overture to Death is set in the hills of Dorset and Marsh is less at home evoking the qualities of this English environment of "upland air", frost "dank earth, and dead leaves" (OTD One, III:16). Marsh does, however, provide a memorable description of a winter's dawn in the area in Chapter Five ("Above Cloudyfold"):  
The field was rimmed with silver, the spinney on the far side was a company of naked trees locked in a deep sleep from which the sound of footsteps among the dead leaves and twigs could not awaken them. The hillside smelt of cold earth and frosty stones. (Five, I:45.)
This is, of course, the novel onto which Edmund Wilson poured such venom (his criticisms were not without justice) and he wrote that Marsh peopled this story with "the dialogue and doings of a lot of faked-up English country people who are even more tedious than those of The Nine Tailors". There can be little debate about the fact that Marsh's first essay in this type of setting is not, on the whole, a spectacular success in terms of her later achievements.

There are two possible (but minor) echoes of E F Benson's work in this novel. Eleanor Prentice, one of two sex-starved spinsters and the murderer of Idris Campanula her rival, is described as a Lucia figure by Henry Jemingham for dramatizing herself as "the first lady of the district. The squiress. The chatelaine of Pen Cuckoo" (One, I:11). Also, at the end of the story Alleyn refers to "the Quantock case" (Twenty-five, I:231) which possibly echoes the surname of Daisy Quantock in the Lucia stories. Miss Prentice is described as giving Alleyn, who "took an instant dislike to her", a hand like a fish, and Marsh perceptively captures the dramatic nature of the suppressed discord between these "church hens" in their rivalry for the hand of the rector of Winton St Giles.

Marsh shows a real fondness in her portrayal of Walter Copeland this unhappy rector, who begins to realize that the old maids "use the confessional as a means of informing
against each other" (One, II:24). It is remarked that Copeland is a man of real scruple who is "unambitious and sincere", with a love of the Pen Cuckoo parish (One, I:22), and the scene where he attempts to dissuade Miss Prentice from totally misusing the confessional (Seven, I) is strongly pervaded with his own sense of bewildered frustration. Before Alleyn has conclusive proof with which to arrest Miss Prentice he writes of this petty village hen in a letter to Troy (to whom he is not yet married):

I think she's a religious fanatic, heavily focused on the rector... If you believe in the God Christ preached, you must be overwhelmed by your faith, and in time of trouble turn, with a heart of grace, to prayer. But I don't think Eleanor Prentice is that sort of religious. God knows I'm no psycho-analyst, but I imagine she'd be meat and drink to any one who was. Does one talk about a sex-fixation? Probably not. Anyway, she's gone the way modern psychology seems to consider axiomatic with women of her age and condition (Twenty-one, III:205).

In *Death at the Bar* (1939) Marsh describes the South Devon landscape as represented by the coastal village of Ottercombe. The genuine eccentric figure is the proprietor of the "Plume of Feathers" pub, Abel Pomeroy, whose intimidating treatment of his son Will recalls that of old John Willet of the Maypole Inn in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*. Alleyn even enlists the aid of a would-be Watson, a Colonel Brammington, whose manners Alleyn describes as worthy of Lord Chesterfield (Twenty, I:242) but whose fascination with crime leads him to make the excessive statement, "It was an enlivening murder... I did know the victim and I frankly confess I adore a murder" (Nineteen, III:236).
The boundary between art and life seems shattered, for Brammington's remark would be more suited to a spinsterish addict of crime stories. But Brammington is the local Chief Constable and the victim a London stranger to Ottercombe after all, and the Colonel is a stock figure rather like the simple local constable, Sergeant Plank in *Last Ditch*, whose manner of arrival so astonishes Julia Pharamond:

"Good evening all", said the policeman, dismounting. "What seems to be the trouble?"
Julia walked up to him with outstretched hand.
"You say it!" she cried. 'You really do say it! How perfectly super".
"Beg pardon, madam?" said the policeman, sizing her up (*LD*, III, IV:72).

It comes as no further surprise when Plank meets Ricky Alleyn and tells him "I had the pleasure working under the Chief Superintendent on a Case in the West Country. He wouldn't remember, of course" (*IV*, I:77). Regardless of whether or not Alleyn is out in New Zealand or in England (or France in *Spinsters in Jeopardy* for that matter), it is always this celebrated "pin-up detective" who scores the investigatory coup de maître.

Marsh depicts some new sidelights on village life in East Mardian in *Off With His Head* (1956) principally through its Rector, the Reverend Samuel Stayne, "a gentle, unworldly man who attempted to follow the teaching of the Gospels literally" and who chooses not to ride to hounds (*Four*, II:60). Stayne seems complacent about the revival of old fertility dances
for a churchman, but as he explains to Mrs Bünz, "the Dance of the Sons is a kind of child's view of a great truth. The church, more or less, took the ceremony under her wing, you know, many years ago" (Eleven, III:213). The scene when Stayne learns that his son is to leave another girl after fornication to marry Camilla Campion (Ten, II:196) is handled with superb compassion. Much the same kind of respect is accorded to the Rev Adrian Carstairs of Portcarrow (Dead Water), a devout man with a simple faith who fears the new publicity which the island gains, yet receives an increased stipend as a consequence.

Finally there is the Vicar of the little Kentish village of Upper Quintern in Grave Mistake (1978). The Rev Walter Cloudsley is clearly a member of a vanishing species. He has recently returned from visiting Rome with an open mind (I, I:4) and is described as ending his talk to the Parish Ladies Group about that trip "on a note of ecumenical wistfulness" (:5). It is later remarked that Cloudsley ministers "a little sadly, to twenty parishioners in a very beautiful old church that had once housed three hundred" (I, III:17). This is, again, an affectionate portrait and when Alleyn has to direct the exhumation of Sybil Foster's grave, the Vicar offers to witness the event whilst admitting to being "a squeamish man" (IX, II: 236). When Claude Carter's body is recovered the Vicar states that he must now pray for the living - that is, the murderer
(IX, III:241) - just as Samuel Stayne told Mrs Bünz he would do likewise for another very unhappy soul (OWH:214).

The St Crispin's Church is described as "one of the great company of parish churches that stand as milestones in rural history: obstinate resisters to the ravages of time" (V, II: 131). It is this kind of thinking which gives solace to the playwright Verity Preston:

She had been born at Keys, she supposed she would die there, and she had gradually fallen into a semi-detached acceptance of the rhythms of life at Upper Quintern, which in spite of war, bombs, crises and inflations had not changed all that much since her childhood (I, I:5).

This is Allingham's "Auburn" equation and it explains a good deal of the attraction of village settings in the kind of reassuring fiction that detective literature is. Verity also notes to herself that at the Ladies' Guild party she is watching the county, gentry, trade and village all "operating within their age-old class structure" (:7). Finally, Verity Preston muses that the English landscape is "dyed in the heraldic colours of its own history" (:8) and it is this sense of permanence and historicity which Agatha Troy feels: "'I'm an ignoramus about history', Troy thought, 'but I do like to feel it in my bones'" (Clutch of Constables, 2, Two:37-38). Quite some time after Troy discovered Mrs Rickerby-Carrick drowned in the river below Ramsdyke Lock (based on Dedham Lock in John Constable's Suffolk where the novel is set?) she thinks again in terms of the long historical perspective:
For a moment she entertained a notion that because of the violence that threaded its history there was something unremarkable, even appropriate, in the latest affront to The River. Poor Hazel Rickerby-Carrick, she thought, has joined a long line of drowned faces and tumbled limbs: Plantagenets and Frenchmen, Lancastrians and Yorkists, cropped, wigged and ringleted heads: bloated and desecrated bodies. They had drenched the fields and fed The River. The landscape had drawn them into itself and perhaps grown richer for them (COC 7, One:143).

Such sentiments would be patently devoid of sense in a country like New Zealand, yet aside from this obvious attraction of the English landscape registering itself in Marsh's stories comes a somewhat inexplicable interest in mentally deficient young village males.

The first of these unfortunates is the petulant Ernie Anderson who is suspected of "whiffling his old man's head off" in a village mummers ritual (Five, I:79) but who turns out to have been a pawn in the hands of Simon Begg, an unscrupulous killer. Ernie is inflamed because his father has killed his favourite dog (a mongrel) and his mental confusion is aptly illustrated when he tells Camilla Campion that he wants to play the Fool in the Sword Dance:

"I got the fancy", he said, looking at Camilla out of the corners of his eyes, "to die and be rose again" (Three, II:49-50).

Ernie is too dull to see that the affair merely involves acting, and he is later chided by his brothers for sharpening his sword - "They pointed out, angrily, that the function of the Whiffler was
merely to go through a pantomine of making a clear space for the dance that was to follow" (Three, IV:54). Superintendent Carey tells Alleyn that Ernie "is not what you'd call right smart. He's a bit touched. Not simple exactly but not right" (Five, I:76). The point is that on impulse Simon Begg exploits Ernie's resentment against his father's dominance and perversity (which Ernie's ready salutes to Begg testify) in order to help him murder old William Anderson so as to gain his petrol garage extensions. This throws further light on Marsh's conception of the criminal.

In *Dead Water* Wally Treherne is a subnormal and cruelly persecuted lad who lets out odd cries like those of seagulls. Wally is treated like an animal until he receives a miraculous Lourdes-like cure for his ungainly warts; even after this, Wally exhibits his "new" hands on request, like a "trained animal" Alleyn thinks (6, I:120). Miss Emily speaks of Wally's "gibberish", uncouth cries and arm-waving (5, III:107) and it is later remarked by Alleyn that he will "probably be sent to an institution" (:110). Although this "poor little devil" is not exploited by a murderer, he is still exploited nonetheless. Wally is not described without compassion (despite his ludicrous antics with ice-cream) and it is his version of the crucial events which helps in apprehending the murderer.

The same role is played in *Grave Mistake* by Daft Artie, a
dull young man "not quite all there" (II, I:29). Artie is a gangling "six-foot adolescent" who is "no more than fifty p in the pound" (VII; II:182) and who helps Bruce Gardener (the murderer of two people in the novel) in his duties as a gardner and in digging the grave of Sybil Foster. It is remarked that it is impossible to divine Artie's age; that he was "somewhere between puberty and manhood" and that he has "an incipient beard and a feral look" (:183) which is accompanied by a screech and raucous laughter. Artie is a boy of the wilds who likes to sleep out at night in a hedge. In fact the author states that this awkward lad laughs "the age-old guffaw of the rustic oaf" (:185), but, like Wally Trehern, Daft Artie trips up the murderer's alibi with his own tell-tale observation that he saw Gardener working till midnight in the graveyard one night. When Alleyn is hit by a flying brick during an evening reconstruction of events, Daft Artie is blamed but Alleyn begins to have his doubts - "No good making a song and dance over it: the boy's not responsible" (VIII, III:222). The point which these exploited innocents in Marsh's stories underscore is the opportunism which toughies like Begg and Gardener exhibit in attempting to place the security of their alibis upon the supposed unreliability of their mental inferiors.

Aside from Grave Mistake, Marsh's best village setting is conveyed in Scales of Justice (1955), mainly in the form of the memorable Nurse Kettle's warm love of the countryside around
the mythical "Swevenings" in Barfordshire. It is significant that Marsh chose a Middle English word meaning a dream place for the name of the village. Alleyn explains to Fox that the area has had a turbulent past ("This Colonel's blood is not the first soldiers' by a long chalk to be spilt at Swevenings" (Four, 3:79) and yet the opening description of the place follows along Auden's lines as if to emphasize the stark contradiction of murder there:

Nurse Kettle pushed her bicycle to the top of Watt's Hill and there paused. Sweating lightly, she looked down on the village of Swevenings. Smoke rose in cosy plumes from one or two chimneys; roofs cuddled into surrounding greenery. The Chyne, a trout stream, meandered through meadow and coppice and slid blamelessly under two bridges. It was a circumspect landscape. Not a faux pas, architectural or horticultural, marred the seemliness of the prospect (One, I:9).

The word "cosy" well epitomizes this rural idyll, and Nurse Kettle pauses to "observe triumphantly: 'Where every prospect pleases', without completing the quotation, because in Swevenings not even Man was Vile" (:11). Little would we suspect all the undercurrents which actually suffuse the village, from the Phinn-Cartarette rivalry for the mammoth local trout ("the Old 'Un") to Kitty Cartarette's murderous designs upon her unwary husband, which provide the book with its momentum. The society in a state of grace is short-lived and it is suitably ironic that the young lovers Rose Cartarette and Mark Lacklander find themselves in their garden discussing the Clown's melancholy lament:

Come away, come away, death,  
And in sad cypress let me be laid;  
Fly away, fly away, breath;
I am slain by a fair cruel maid (Twelfth Night II, iv). The irony is because one of each's parents is involved in a capital charge. Nurse Kettle (an equable but more humane descendant of Dickens' Sairey Gamp) enjoys a quiet evening walk at dusk into a willow grove along the banks of the Chyne River, whereupon she hears a "cry of mourning, intolerably loud" and discovers Colonel Cartarette, murdered by his wife Kitty (a literal femme fatale) (Three, 6:64-65). This otherwise charming story closes with the opening words and Kettle again surveying the view from Watt's Hill (minus the "Where every prospect pleases" quotation), and on this occasion Commander Syce - who she had sorrowfully judged to have "run to seed", becoming alcoholic and flabby - gives her the portrait of the village which she had always wanted. It is a nice touch to conclude a somewhat tense novel. Syce is one of several empurpled and often irritable whisky-slogging men, like Major Barrimore (Dead Water [1964]), Colonel Forrester (Tied Up in Tinsel [1972]) and Colonel Cockburn-Monfort (Black As He's Painted [1974]). Forrester, an old Etonian, and Major Marchbanks (Governor of Halberds Vale) are stock figures, as is Mrs Forrester who,

looked, as she had sounded, formidable. She had a blunt face with a mouth like a spring-trap, prominent eyes fortified by pebble-lenses and thin, grey hair lugged back into a bun (TUT, 1, 4:23).

Colonel Forrester falls victim to several heart turns while his volatile wife declaims strenuously about the criminality of servants.
In Black As He's Painted, Cockburn-Montfort is a drunken retired Colonel from the army of an African nation, the mythical "Ng'ombwana" and he murders the Ng'ombwana Ambassador to London and then a panic-stricken couple (the Sanskrits) who were likely to reveal their complicity in a coup d'etat which would see the alcoholic Colonel reinstated into the Ng'ombwana armed forces. Alleyn observes that the Cockburn-Montforts, like Commander Syce, have "sadly run to seed" (BHP Three, II:72).

The Colonel is a hoarse-voiced fellow and his wife gives the police a red-herring testimony after the murder of the Ambassador. Alleyn despises the Colonel and finds him, after the second murder,

in an armchair with his mouth open, snoring profoundly and hideously. He would have presented a less distasteful picture, Alleyn thought, if he had discarded the outward showing of an officer and - ambiguous addition - a gentleman: the conservative suit, the signet ring on the correct finger, the handsome brogues, the regimental tie, the quietly elegant socks and, lying on the floor by his chair, the hat from Jermyn Street - all so very much in order. And Colonel Cockburn-Montfort so very far astray (Nine, II:205).

This provides an additional example of Marsh's unambiguous attitude towards pretenders; noblesse oblige constitutes a major value in her fictional universe. Thus the rotund Lady Lacklander asks Nurse Kettle to tell her "without any frills" what she thinks about the aristocracy:

"Do you, asked Lady Lacklander with relish, "find us effete, ineffectual, vicious, obsolete and altogether extraneous?" "No", said Nurse Kettle stoutly, "I don't". "Some of us are, you know". Nurse Kettle squatted back on her haunches retaining a
firm grip on Lady Lacklander's little heel. "It's not the people so much as the idea", she said.
"Ah", said Lady Lacklander, "you're an Elizabethan, Kettle. You believe in degree. You're a female Ulysees, old girl. But degree is now dependent upon behaviour, I'd have you know" (SOJ Three, III:54).

In short, Lady Lacklander is rightly concerned about the problem of "shabby behaviour", and the Chief Constable (Sir James Punston) tells Alleyn that she runs Chyning and Swevenings - 'For some reason they seem to like it. Survival of the feudal instinct you might think" (Four, 3:82). In Chapter Twelve Lady Lacklander administers her final rebuke to her oddball son George regarding his reckless "elephantine flirtations" (Twelve, 1:248) with Kitty Cartarette, forthrightly scolding him for muddling his values - "You led a completely unscrupulous trollop to suppose that if she was a widow you'd marry her" (:250). The fact that such a f-oppish flirtation led to an unpremeditated murder reinforces the seriousness of George Lacklander's dereliction of duty as a member of the gentry.

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To conclude, it has been established in this chapter that Ngaio Marsh's loyalty to her own country (both in real life and in her fictions) must remain unquestioned; that we can acquit her of any charges of sensationalist use of "local colour" in describing the human and geographical scene in New Zealand; that Marsh's English village stories attest to her instinctive feeling that perhaps New Zealand may never become truly civilized,
whereas in England the feel of human history is embedded in
the landscape; that Marsh resists idealism about English
country life (perhaps there may on occasion be arsenic as well
as honey for tea in these quaint villages), and that it is
only in her New Zealand stories that Dame Ngaio Marsh has
managed to scale the perilous heights of descriptive excellence.

Perhaps the final point to emphasize is that detective
stories are not a firmly realistic form of writing and that
this provides some measure of justification (if justification
be required) for Marsh's obvious interest in the frankly
unusual and even larger-than-life (in terms of odd accents, Daft
Arties, eccentric Colonels and sundry representatives of a
rather jaded aristocracy). Such variety is unquestionably the
spice of Marsh's fiction and will surely act as a major source
of its attraction for some considerable time to come.
CHAPTER FIVE:
THE THEATRICAL VISION.
(i) Life as Theatre and Mask.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

- JACQUES
   (As You Like It, II, vii [1599-1600],
   Shakespeare).

These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on...

- PROSPERO (The Tempest, IV, i [1611-12],
  Shakespeare).

It may be (as some philosophers have left behind 'em),
that this megacosm, this great world, is no more than
a stage, where every one must act his part...

- WILLIAM ROWLEY
  ("Dedication" to A Fair Quarrel [1617]
  Middleton & Rowley).

I have considered our whole life is like a play: wherein
every man forgetful of himself, is in travail with
expression of another.

- BEN JOHNSON (Timber: or Discoveries [1641]).

The World Dramaturgist has written: Exeunt.

- THOMAS CARLYLE (Past and Present, Book II
  Ch. II [1843]).

They say, when the Great Prompter's hand shall ring
Down the last curtain upon earth and sea,
All the Good Mimes will have eternity
To praise their Author, worship love and sing...

- RUPERT BROOKE ("The True Beatitude" [1913]).
Do I believe in God?
Well, yes I suppose in a sort of way;
It's really terribly hard to say --
I'm sure that there must be, of course,
Some kind of vital motive force,
Some power that holds the winning cards
Behind life's ambiguous façades.

But whether you think me odd or not,
I can't decide if it's God or not.

- NOEL COWARD.

In an earlier chapter we have considered the detective novel as a clear example of the art of storytelling. Having also established the centrality of drama in the artistic career of Dame Ngaio Marsh, it is worth remarking that her novels are replete with numerous theatrical motifs. Her detective hero, Alleyn, is a rabid Shakespearean who quotes phrases from Stratford-upon-Avon's Bard on several occasions.

We have considered Marsh's style and yet this dramatic influence vis-à-vis her novels has not been fully taken into account by any of Marsh's critics. The influence of the drama has been so profound that instead of asking if she, in choosing to pour so much energy, expertise and talent into the detective genre, is a "wasted" novelist, the point may well be that Ngaio Marsh is something of a wasted dramatist. Wilkie Collins once wrote, "the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of fiction" (Dedication of Basil [1852]) and Somerset Maugham also noted that

the delight in listening to stories is as natural to human nature as the delight in looking at the dancing and miming out of which drama arose. That it exists unimpaired is shown in the vogue of the detective novel. (1)
Detective novels consist not so much of a series of events as of "scenes", and like plays they have to be rigorously economical. Also, like drama, detective stories are based on linear and continuous plots and therefore page references rather than chapter numbers per se are important. One can also parallel orthodox drama with the structure of detective stories; on one case Alleyn actually ponders about "whatever drama was unfolding at Halberds" (TUT 8, 4:184).

The dramatic parallels are as follows: i) elaboration of plot after the introduction of the dramatis personae; ii) incidental characters may populate the action for added variety; iii) the clash of personalities and hidden tensions find an outlet in the dramatic climax of murder; iv) additional drama ensues as the investigation proceeds; and v) there follows a standard resolution and dénouement. Ngaio Marsh brings to her novels a direct sense of atmosphere in the dramatic and actually physical sense, registered in her sensitivity to wind, rain, snow and extremes of heat and cold.

The writer that most effectively demonstrated the possible affinity between drama and the novel was Henry James, who produced what Bernard Berenson called the novel of "total dramatization", most notably in The Awkward Age (1899). In February 1895 James hit upon the "principle of the Scenario", the drama of consciousness. James wrote that this concept fits "the complicated chambers of both the narrative and the dramatic lock." In his Preface to The Awkward Age James wrote of his new attempt to use dialogue as a fresh instrument to illumine his subject matter:

Each of my "lamps" would be the light of a single "social occasion" in the history and intercourse of the characters concerned, and would bring out to the full the latent colour of the scene in question and cause it to illustrate, to the last drop, its bearing on my theme. I revelled in this notion
of the Occasion as a thing, really and completely a scenic thing, and could scarce name it, while crouching amid the thick arcana of my plan, with a large enough O. The beauty of the conception was in the approximation of respective divisions of my form to the successive Acts of a Play ... (4)

It has been noted of Dickens, possibly Marsh's favourite novelist, that he "represents not life directly, as it were, so much as life mounted on the stage." Ruskin remarked on Dickens' "circle of stage fire" (Unto this last, I, Cornhill Magazine [Aug. 1860]) and Edmund Wilson called Dickens "the greatest dramatic writer that the English had had since Shakespeare." Robert Garis picked this up as a source of what he termed "the Dickens problem" -- "because he is a consummate performer there is a Dickens problem." Garis argues that Dickens practised a "theatrical art", but warned:

I want to avoid the implication that it is the bad, the melodramatic, the trashy Dickens who is a theatrical artist. (8)

There is a Dickens problem because we ordinarily do not regard the theatrical mode as capable of "serious" artistic effects and meaning. (9)

Garis also makes the point that in the world of the "Dickens theatre" "only the most mysterious and out of the ordinary emotional states awaken, in both the artist and the audience, the attention of sympathetic imagination." 10

It is this writer's belief that, in a different sense and on a more limited plane, Ngaio Marsh shares the label of "theatrical artist"; that her novels almost amount to dramatic texts and that she has used the Jamesian formula for similar thematic purposes.

Garis also makes the very valid general point that the theatrical mode is not appropriate "for dealing with the inner life, nor is an artist who works in this mode likely to be interested in the inner life." 11
When Garis adds that such artists usually possess a brilliant gift
for mimicry, the whole idea frights home to what Dame Ngaio is essen-
tially working at. She very perceptively transcribes outward actions
and speech mannerisms (because of her strong, innate sense of the dra-
matic), whereas an artist like Virginia Woolf transcribes the chaotic
inner world of consciousness -- of everchanging perceptions, thoughts
and emotions. In either case transcription is the operative mode and
in fact Woolf attempted (with modest success) to combine both approaches
in her last novel, Between the Acts (1941).

The final parallel with drama comes with the legacy of melodrama.
It was remarked in Chapter Two that several crime stories were popular
melodramas in the nineteenth century. The link with the theatricality
of Dame Ngaio's detective novels is that therein life may be seen as a
play where heroes and villains remain safely demarcated at the end of
them.

It will be apparent that this relates to Marsh's suspicion of
Angry Young Men and other assorted anti-heroes. Northrop Frye made the
point that:

In melodrama two themes are important: the triumph of moral
virtue over villainy, and the consequent idealizing of the
moral views assumed to be held by the audience. In the melo-
drama of the brutal thriller we come as close as it is normally
possible for art to come to the pure self-righteousness of the
lynching mob. (12)

Surely it is not this aspect of melodrama which finds an echo
in Marsh, although as Colin Watson so ably pointed out, the melodramatic
conception of villainy has had a significant part to play in much crime
fiction as such. 13

When G. K. Hunter discussed the "well-made play" he observed
that it was difficult in these plays to "balance the conflicting claims
of theatricality and realism without collapsing into farce or melodrama."14
This is an excellent analysis of the tendencies in some of Marsh's novels, yet her use of melodramatic elements delineates peculiarities of character and temperament; it is not of the old lamentable kind, but does add to the entertainment value in her presentation as shall be shown. In short, Marsh's handling of her medium amounts to the message of her fictions.

A role then may be defined as a typified response to a typified expectation. Society has predefined the fundamental typology. To use the language of the theatre from which the concept of role is derived, we can say that society provides the script for all the dramatis personae. The individual actors therefore need but slip into the roles already assigned to them before the curtain goes up. As long as they play their roles as provided for in this script, the social play can proceed as planned.

-- PETER BERGER. (15)

THE FATHER We act that rôle for which we have been cast, that rôle which we are given in life. And in my own case, passion itself, as usually happens becomes a trifle theatrical when it is exalted.

-- LUIGI PIRANDELLO
(Six Characters in Search of an Author, Act I [1921]). (16)

The more melodramatic and "in bad taste" the play within the play is, the more clear the meaning of the total play becomes. Pirandello had this kind of courage -- for which he was certainly not given credit the first time Six Characters was produced.

-- LUIGI SQUARZINA. (17)
It was remarked in Chapter One how Ngaio Marsh involved herself in several productions of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921). Marsh first saw a production of it "superbly directed by Tyrone Guthrie at the Westminster Theatre." Guthrie had previously dealt with *Characters* for the 1929-30 season at Cambridge's Festival Theatre, but the production at the Westminster in London was held in 1932.

Marsh describes her reactions to the play:

I hadn't read it. I knew nothing whatever about it and that is the ideal way of seeing this play for the first time. It takes you by the throat and shakes the daylight out of you. If you long above everything to be a director, this is the play that nags and clamours to be done. I was broody with it, off and on, for some eighteen years before I finally got it out of my system in a burst of three separate productions in three separate countries. It may be a phoney play, its theme -- that reality exists only in the mind of the individual -- may be inconsiderable, but it remains, to my mind, more absolutely the pure material of theatre than any other piece of twentieth century dramatic writing. One may discount its philosophy and dismiss its metaphysics (I do not altogether do so) but tackle it simply as something that happens in a working theatre and it crackles with immediacy. (20)

Well, what of the Pirandellian philosophy and metaphysic? In the programme notes to the Australian tour production (1949) the audience were informed that *Six Characters* "constantly draws our attention to the artificiality of the playhouse and invites us to examine the conventions and absurdities of the theatre." The critic Robert Brustein put the matter more widely when he observed that the play is, a probing philosophical drama about the artifice of the stage, the artifice of art, and the artifice of reality in generally suspenseful and exciting rhythm. (21)

"The artifice of reality." Francis Fergusson, while acknowledging that the play "may seem, at first sight, to be shop-worn in its ideas and, in its dramaturgy, hardly more than a complex piece of theatrical trickery", realises that "Pirandello sees human life as theatrical." Elizabeth Burns considers that Pirandello "questioned the right of the ordinary
world to be considered more real than the fabricated world of the
play." To Pirandello theatricality is "only an emphasized exercise
of the rhetorical conventions employed in social life." 23

In the Pirandellian viewpoint, life is a succession of "scenes"
into which human beings fall victim in often contradictory and in-
authentic roles. Eric Bentley very wisely warns that "Drama and life
have so much in common,[that] they can easily get confused." 24
Bentley refers to the Globe theatre motto, totus mundis facit histrionem
("all the world plays the actor"), and states that Pirandello has,

created a living image which can never die -- the image of
man as actor and of life as the game of role-playing, il guico
delle parti. (25)

Adriano Tilgher characterizes Pirandellian drama as "a clash of
Life and Mask" 26, adding that:

To the eyes of an artist like Pirandello.....reality will appear
dramatic at its very roots, the essence of drama lying in the
struggle between life's primal nakedness and the garments or
masks with which men must by all means insist on clothing it. (27)

I have allowed these digressions on Henry James, Dickens and
Pirandello in order that their influence upon the total oeuvre of
Ngilo Marsh can be more readily seen. Her admission that she does not
"altogether" discount Pirandello's metaphysic is very important.

In producing Six Characters, Marsh operated on the original 1921
version. She borrowed Tyrone Guthrie's very effective idea for revealing
the six Characters. Kurt Kasznar describes the device:

They started with an empty stage. The whole thing is an empty
stage. The stagehands were going back and forth with ladders
and flats and suddenly one flat goes by and there are six
characters standing there. (28)
J L Styan explains that in the 1925 version of the play, Pirandello expanded the introduction prior to the revelation of the Characters, "allowing more time to establish a convention of realism":

This definitive version opens with the hammering of a stage carpenter; the company takes longer to assemble, and a back-stage piano is played for a few of the actors to dance as they wait; the leading lady is tardy, and makes a separate entrance through the auditorium with a dog -- a real one. All this business is improvised naturally in order to lower our guard before the disruptive anti-illusion of the Characters' entrance. (29)

Marsh explains in her autobiography that this is "a Commedia del Arte gambit." She suggests that she was unaware of the 1925 version:

Pirandello merely tells us that a company of actors is assembling for rehearsal and leaves the rest to the director. I wrote some five pages of dialogue as a framework upon which the player could improvise and between us we built a scene of preparation lasting about eight minutes up to the entry of the "Manager" and the beginning of Act I as it is printed. (30)

It is stretching our credulity to imagine that, while Marsh indisputably worked from the 1921 version, she had not even heard of the 1925 revision. If, however, this is true, the parallels are quite astonishing. In the Marsh "prologue" the Character Actress enters from the house (the only one to do so) and begins to do some knitting (this is an alternative to the lap-dog in the 1925 edition). When the Second Juvenile arrives, he "gallantly kisses" the Character Actress and the Ingénue and "imitates a mannequin." Lastly the Juvenile enters:

They improvise a stagey little scene. He and ingénue dance a few steps of a minuet  

(Prologue Typescript). 

The whole thing occurs to the accompany-ment of the piano and instead of a stage carpenter, Marsh used whistling mechanists. The rehearsal of Pirandello's Rules of the Game (Marsh's choice of play being significant) then follows.
One observer of Marsh's production noted that she made the characters more "theatrical" than the actors and negated Pirandello's intention somewhat by enlarging their theatricality when Pirandello wanted the characters to become "super-real" as it were. However, Marsh maintains that it is a disastrous tendency of some British producers to understate continental plays. She wanted to celebrate the oddness of Pirandello's world and it seems plausible that it was the unconventionality of Six Characters which attracted this very individualistic producer.

The Father is pained to observe that for the actors "the thing is only -- and rightly so ... a kind of game ..."

THE LEADING LADY: (interrupting indignantly) A game! We're not children here, if you please! We are serious actors. Really!

THE FATHER: I don't deny it. What I mean is the game, or play, of your art, which has to give, as the gentleman says, a perfect illusion of reality.

MANAGER: Precisely ------!

THE FATHER: Now, if you consider the fact that we (indicates himself and the other five Characters), as we are, have no other reality outside of this illusion ... (Act III [31].)

This philosophical point has profound implications for in the 1925 version the stepdaughter rushes out, laughing shrilly, to the audience and on into the real street outside. George Neveux rightly wrote, "Except by a blunder we cannot drop the curtain on Pirandello's drama because there is no clear boundary between life and art." 32

There is, then, no clear discontinuity between the reality of the characters and that of the audience. If this kinship is correct and the "professional" actors are the phantasms, then we -- ordinary people act assigned roles in life; a life which truly is theatre and
in a society that is surely an organized drama! The six Characters
also represent types of humanity as a whole, each trying to realise a
fictitiously plausible dramatic situation by a process of mythicizing
daily life, by a process of "action as theatrical" in Francis Fergusson's
vivid phrase.

That Ngai Marsh veered towards this interpretation is proven in
the fact that she cut out the Manager's final, anguished line: "Pretence?
Reality? To hell with it all! ... I've lost a whole day over these
people, a whole day!" This meant that in her production the play ended
with its melodramatic climax where the young boy shoots himself:

OTHER ACTORS: No, no, it's only make-believe, it's only pretence!

THE FATHER (with a terrible cry): Pretence? Reality, sir, reality! (33)

With Marsh's interpretation, the force of Cambon's judgement that "the
dermise of the play is quite absurd; it's any old epilogue, stuck there just
to wind things up and let the curtain fall", loses its edge.

Remembering that Marsh saw Guthrie's production of Six Characters
just before or around the time when she began writing her first detective
novel, we may ask if it is possible that the real cast of actors in this
play influenced the handling of actors in her novels. More to the point,
Dame Ngai published a novel (Death and the Dancing Footman) centred
around the Pirandellian paradox some eight years before she ever staged
Six Characters in Search of an Author. This combination of intellectual
drama and detective fiction may at first appear either misguided and/or
pretentious, yet Robert Brustein's summary of the Pirandellian vision
allows points of contact:

His plots are bursting with operatic feelings and melodramatic
climaxses in an exaggerated Sicilian vein. Hyperbolic expressions
of grief, rage and jealousy alternate with murders, suicides, and
mortal accidents; wronged wives, maddened husbands, and bestial
lovers foment adultery, incest, illegitimacy, plots and duels ... The
characters, furthermore, seem to lose psychological depth as
they gain philosophical eloquence. (35)

In short, the Pirandellian situation involves grand histrionics
and dramatic conflict. Pirandello's unabashed theatricality and the drowning and suicide in *Characters* well earned P. G. Wodehouse's quip, when a character in his story "Best Seller" refers to "Six Characters in Search of an Undertaker"! 36

Although Ngaio Marsh has been working her experience of theatre into the craft of fiction in many stories with actual theatre settings -- such as *Enter a Murderer* (1935), *Vintage Murder* (1937), "I Can Find My Way Out" (1946), *Final Curtain* (1947), *Opening Night* (1951), *False Scent* (1959) and *Death at the Dolphin* (1966) -- it is not the purpose of this chapter to provide critical evaluations of them. Rather, we shall examine parts of several novels which will better reveal the nature of Marsh's theatricality.

+ + + + +

Man is at his most inventive, his most enfranchised when he is "playing the game". It is only death that knows no rules, that insists, always, on winning.

-- GEORGE STEINER.

+ + + + +

Marsh followed the "several characters in search of an undertaker" formula in *Death and the Dancing Footman* (1941). One notices in many of her other novels the depiction of a nervously energetic world characterized by a deep air of unreality, with reality lurking to break through with often scandalous inappropriateness. The continuance of this precarious calm is usually effected with industrious role-playing, and the whole atmosphere -- to use a word which she has employed -- is "stagey". In this sense we can see how indebted Ngaio Marsh has been to the Pirandellian clash between Life (or naked reality) and Mask (Social Fiction). Thus in describing the underlying structure of *Six*
Characters, Robert Brustein argued that the Characters "put on their masks, hoping to hide their shameful faces by playing a role." 37

Dr Eric Berne has written, in his classic book Games People Play (1964), of the social significance of these kinds of games:

(1)n order to get away from the ennui of pastimes without exposing themselves to the dangers of intimacy, most people compromise for games when they are available, and these fill the major part of the more interesting hours of social intercourse. (38)

Felix Krull, in Thomas Mann's Confessions of Felix Krull (1954), thought much about the arbitrary nature of roles. Krull, a waiter with social pretensions and a formidable gift for con work, pondered on his idea of the interchangeability of roles as he, standing in the lobby or dining hall ... watching the hotel guests being waited and fawned upon by blue-liveried minions ... with a change of clothes and make-up, the servitors might often just as well have been the masters, and many of those who lounged in the deep wicker chairs, smoking their cigarettes, might have played the waiter. (39)

Berne adds that "The essential characteristic of human play is not that the emotions are spurious, but that they are regulated." 40 This is presumably what Dikon Bell has in mind when he talks to Barbara Claire about actors:

"The thing about actors, for instance, that makes them different from ordinary people is that they are technicians of emotion ... If he likes someone, he lets them know it with soft music and purring chest notes. If he's upset he puts tears in his voice ... He just does things more thoroughly" (CS Twelve, III: 218).

In the Dancing Footman, Marsh uses the device of a mischievous bachelor creating a houseparty of eight, one of whom (Mr Aubrey Mandrake) is a post-surrealist dramatist. This underscores the fact that her interpretation of Six Characters agrees that "dramacality" exists in real life and that, as in the Pirandellian original, it is the theatre professional who plays second fiddle in noting down the lines for a play from reality! (Marsh has declared in another context of the great
Victorian and Edwardian actors, with obvious approval, that they "looked and behaved like actors: larger than life and twenty times as natural". (40)

Jonathan Royal explicitly conceives of his house-party in terms of a play; as Mandrake arrives, Royal thinks to himself "This is the overture. We're off" (DDF I, I:9). Mandrake makes an "effective" entrance, but his host is quick to inform him that,

"Our customary positions are reversed. For to-night, yes, and for to-morrow and the next day, I shall be the creator and you the audience" (I, II:11).

Royal claims for himself a "sense of drama in the ordinary un-classy sense" (12) and tells Mandrake of his new Idea about creating a "cathartic" drama with flesh and blood characters who happen to be antagonists:

"One had only to restrict them a little, confine them within the decent boundaries of a suitable canvas, and they would make a pattern. It seemed to me that, given the limitations of an imposed stage, some of my acquaintances would at once begin to unfold an exciting drama; that, so restricted, their conversation would begin to follow as enthralling a design as that of a fugue ... I would summon my characters to the theatre of my own house and the drama would unfold itself."

"Pirandello," Mandrake began, "has become quite ---" "But this is not Pirandello", Jonathan interrupted in a great hurry. "No. In this instance we shall see, not six characters in search of an author, but an author who has deliberately summoned seven characters to do his work for him" (:13).

Mandrake confesses, after routine qualms ("first-night nerves"), to a "violent interest" in Royal's Idea. This contrasts with the sullen attitude of the Son in Characters towards his Father's "Demon of Experiment".

The essence of much dramatic conflict concerns, in Adriano Tilgher's words, the opposition "between the individual and his image as construed by others." 26 The sociologist Anselem Strauss noted in his book Mirrors and Masks (1959) that our identity is connected with
the fateful appraisals made of oneself by oneself and by others. The masks he then thereafter presents to the world and its citizens are fashioned upon his anticipations of their judgements. (42)

Royal is unable to induce reconciliations between warring opponents and the whole exercise follows the logic of Strauss' "fateful appraisals" -- so fateful as to climax in two deaths, underlining Steiner's dictum that death "knows no rules". The whole party is conducted as a macabre game -- the murderer places false leads in a game called Charter so as to incriminate the innocent Dr Hart. (This is paralleled by the game of Backgammon in the midst of a devouring family feud at Ancreton Manor in Final Curtain ([1947]). Royal's own tendency to ham is shown when he feigns to fumble around for pads and pencils -- "Jonathan, with a convincing display of uncertainty, hunted in a drawer where Mandrake had seen him secrete the printed block of diagrams and the requisite number of pencils"! (DDF IV, IV:61) As with the ironical charades in Surfeit of Lampreys, these games form a kind of microcosm of life in general as "play within plays" as it were.

Royal unashamedly considers his party as living theatre; the mood is infectious, for Madame Lisse speaks to Hart of playing his "part" (III, III:49). Royal talks of "our cast of characters" (III, V:53) to Lady Hersey and Mandrake watches the gamesmanship over cocktails in terms of a "conversation piece", studded with effective "entrances" and cues (III, I:42). Added to this, Mrs Compline (the lady who suffers from a ruinous face-lift) is described as having a face like a "terrible mask" (II, II:25) which also has the unfortunate aspect of an "exaggerated dolorous expression of a clown" (ibid. :26). As resentments steadily come to the boil the atmosphere of the gathering is described as one of "bathos which hung over them like a pall" (V, II:71). As with all genuine bathos, the scene collapses into pitiful melodrama when the group begin to discuss violent attempts on one another:
The conversation became fantastic. William showed a tendency to shout and Nicholas to sulk. Choris turned upon Mandrake a face so eloquent of misery and alarm ... (VII, IV:117.)

Melodramatic episodes recur at such odd moments in several Marsh stories. In Colour Scheme (1943) there are two strong exhibitions of exaggerated emotions. The first is when Dr Ackrington rejects a bloody steak which sends Huia the help back into the kitchen:

During the lively scene which followed, Barbara hooted with frightened laughter, Mrs Claire murmured conciliatory phrases, Simon shuffled his feet, and Huia in turn shook her head angrily, giggled, and uttered soft apologies. Finally she burst into tears and ran back with the steak to the kitchen, where a crash of crockery suggested that she had hurled the dish to the floor.

(CS One, III:22)

In the second instance, Dikon Bell is treated to a fiery display of Hollywood-style fisticuffs after Bert Smith has called Bell's manhood into question and Questing has entered on the defensive:

An inexplicable and ridiculous affair changed abruptly into a piece of convincing melodrama. Dikon had seen many such a set-up at the cinema studios. Smith, shaky and bloated, crouched where he had fallen and mouthed at Questing. Questing got to his feet and dabbed at the corner of his mouth with his handkerchief. His cigar lay smoking on the ground between them. It was a shot in technicolour, for Rangi's peak was not tinctured with such a violence of purple as is seldom seen outside the theatre, and in the middle distance rose the steam of the hot pools. Dikon waited for a bit of rough dialogue to develop and was not disappointed (Two, IV: 43-44).

When, in Black As He's Painted, Alleyn forces Gomez and Co. to look at the murdered corpses of the Sanskrits, they "all three in turn became puppet-like caricatures of themselves, acting in two-dimensional and crudely exaggerated style. In any other setting the element of black farce would have rioted." The farce rises "like a bout of unseemly hysteria at the bad performance of a Jacobean tragedy" (BHP Nine, III:210-11). The section ends (:214) on an even more dramatic (if that be possible) climax.

Inserted into False Scent, straight before a description of the reactions to the news of Mary Bellamy's death, is an authorial comment on melodrama:
It might be argued that the difference between high tragedy and melodrama rests in the indisputable fact that the latter is more true to nature. People, even the larger-than-life people of the theatre, tend at moments of tension to express themselves not in unexpected or memorable phrases but in clichés (Hour, 1:93).

Therefore it should come as little surprise to Troy when the theatrical director Thomas Ancred asks her "Are you at all keen on the emotions?" (Final Curtain 1, 11:14). The question is an apposite one for as Nigel Bathgate later tells Troy, "the Ancreds, all but one [Thomas], are over-emotionalized" (2, 11:23). The reason for this, as Paul Kentish tells Alleyn, is that "perhaps when there's anything like a crisis we can't escape a sense of audience" (16, 111:245).

It was Anselm Strauss who observed that, even in everyday terms, "face-to-face interplay is better conceived as a narrative or dramatic process" and Elizabeth Burns describes theatricality in ordinary life as "the resort to a special grammar of composed behaviour." Burns points to the parallel between the "creator as actor" and "the individual who assumes roles and foresees and develops sequences of actions." The behaviour of such people can be labelled "theatrical", says Burns, because they fully realize that their actions and speech are analogous to those in the theatre.

In Final Curtain (1947) Marsh chose to write of the murder, after a Birthday Dinner, of Sir Henry Ancred, the veteran Shakespearean actor whose son Thomas dubs him "the Grand Old Man of the British stage" (1, 11:13). And in False Scent (1959) Marsh repeated the formula of death by homicide after a birthday toast to the darling of the West End stage, Mary Bellamy.

The Ancred family discharges an atmosphere of pure theatre; the daughters Millamant and Desdemona have obviously theatrical namesakes. Desdemona is, at the time of the novel, working in a Group theatre.
(2, 11:24) and the youngest grandchild, Panty (the "Bloody Child" so named 'because her bloomers are always coming down" :16) performs coy theatrical antics for Alleyn:

When she saw Alleyn she swung herself into a strange attitude and screamed with affected laughter. He waved to her and she at once did a comedy fall to the floor, where she remained aping violent astonishment (14, 11:212).

The drama centres on the Will which Sir Henry is indiscreet enough to reveal. Of the family only Fenella ("With an interited instinct for a good exit line"; 3, IV:49) and Millament are true actresses, "technicians of emotion". Troy, who has been manoeuvred into painting a portrait of Sir Henry as Macbeth, observes wryly to herself when being escorted in to dinner by the G.O.M., "It's a pity that there isn't an orchestra"!

(4, III:56.)

Sir Henry has been described thus:

The first thing to be said about Sir Henry Ancred was that he filled his role with almost embarrassing virtuosity ... He looked as if he had been specially designed for exhibition... You could hardly believe, Troy thought, that he was true (4, III:55)

Thomas Ancred (the objective chorus to his family) tells Troy that they are all "putting on the great Family Act, you know. It's the same on the stage. People that hate each other's guts make love like angels" (7, IV:110).

When on the first evening of Troy's visit Fenella and Paul announce their marriage plans, she witnesses a violent manifestation of Dikon Bell's "upset" actor types. Sir Henry becomes electric with rage and Paul apologises "We're sorry to make a scene" (6, I:86). Troy discerns that Sir Henry's "first violence was being rapidly transmuted into something more histrionic and much less disturbing" (:87). The main reason for this is because Sir Henry has been upstaged; it was his intention to announce his projected marriage to Sonia Orrincourt, a trumped-up Cockney caricature who possesses "an entirely plastic
loveliness" (:89). His sceptical family all secretly regard his entanglement as a ridiculously debasing octogenarian fling with a woman later described as resembling,

some drawing in a man's magazine of an infuriated baggage in a bedroom. One almost expected some dubious caption to issue in a balloon from her lips (:12, IV:186).

Fenella loses poise for a moment after Sir Henry's rage:

"I won't be silent", said Fenella, performing with dexterity the feat known by actors as topping the other man's lines. "And, if we're to talk about decency, Grandfather, I should have thought it was a damn sight more decent for two people who are young and in love to say there's going to marry each other than for an old man to make an exhibition of himself --"

"Fenella," shouted Pauline and Millamant in unison. "-- doting on a peroxide blonde fifty years younger than himself, and a brazen gold-digger into the bargain" (6, I:88).

This same sense of drama is manifested at the Birthday dinner where Troy considers herself as a mere "bit-part lady" in "the big scene from a film script" (7, IV:110). The effect is maintained with Sir Henry who, with the air of a Field-Marshall in Glorious Technicolour, rose and proposed the King (:112). Shortly afterwards Sir Henry dies of poison, so this is positively his last "Big Exit" as Marsh's sardonic chapter title announces! As Peter Berger writes, "Society provides us with taken-for-granted structures... within which, as long as we follow the rules, we are shielded from the naked terrors of our condition." 47 The point is that behind all these affected scenes lies deep subterfuge and unseemly machinations. The biggest surprise of all comes when Millamant is proven to be a scheming murderer of great subtlety; she proves to be the greatest emotional "technician", killing her father-in-law after keeping shy of "scenes" and displaying great filial and domestic loyalty. "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" in Macbeth's words (Macbeth, I, vii).

The same sense of hidden revulsion and what Brustein described as role-playing to hide shame applies to False Scent. In fact this novel could well be claimed as the finest and fullest exhibition of fictional theatricality in Marsh's corpus.
Alleyn, with characteristic acuity, describes Mary Bellamy (the victim) as a "comediene of the naughty darling school and not a beginner" (FS Four, IV:102). Miss Bellamy is actually a jealous actress who flies into a manic rage when she learns that her subordinate, Pinky Cavendish, has been offered a lead role with sartorial help from Mary's own designer Bertie Saracen! Miss Bellamy seethes (the news has been delivered on her birthday):

A hateful and all too-familiar jolt under the diaphragm warned Miss Bellamy that she had been upset. Simultaneously she knew that somehow or another she must run up a flag of welcome, must show a responsive warmth, must override the awful, menaced, slipping feeling, the nausea of the emotions that Pinky's announcement had churned up (One, IV:33).

This Primadonna throws one of her violent tantrums which are remarked to have "incalculable" sequels (Two, I:37); indeed it is this display of temperament which launches Miss Bellamy into the after-life! (Her obliging husband decides to put her -- not to mention everyone else -- out of her misery.)

Mary Bellamy's life is founded upon pretence which extends beyond the world of her job in the theatre into her domestic arrangements. As Queen of the Household Miss Bellamy treats Miss Plumtree as a character-part nanny (One, IV:25), on social occasions her husband plays "his supporting role of consort" (Three, III:85) and her son Richard Dakers plays "his established role of a sort of unofficial son of the house" (Three, I:69). The crowning irony, of course, is that Charles Templeton is really a bit of an actor himself, so that when he is confronted with the corpse of the woman he has murdered (albeit indirectly), Charles fetches "his breath in irregular, tearing sighs" (Four, I:97). Is he putting on an act or is there a genuine element of pining regret and/or sadness in this action? One perhaps unkindly suspects the former, in that Templeton evidences no urgency to provide a confession.
False Scent fairly bulges with theatrical motifs, including those of roles, masks, ritual, entrances, and assorted dramaturgical jargon. Colonel Warrender and Saracen enter Mary's household to deliver their "votive offerings" on a "comic entrance together"; Saracen banters, "God, what a fool I must look! Take it, darling, quickly or we'll kill the laugh" (One, IV:28). Warrender is "soldierly" in his bearing, with "a brick-coloured Guard face" (Three, I:73) and with a type-casted tendency to utter time-honoured cliches like "Bad show!" Timon Gantry, a noteworthy producer, is amazed at this odd Colonel:

"Are you true?" Gantry asked suddenly, gazing at Warrender with a kind of devotion. "I beg your pardon, Sir?"
Gantry clasped his hands and said ecstatically: "One would never dare! Never! And yet people say one's productions tend towards caricature! You shall give them the lie in their teeth, Colonel. In your own person you shall refute them" (Six, III:186).

Gantry later refers to Warrender as "that monumental, that superb old ham, the colonel" (Eight, III:240) and Alleyn has cause to describe the whole stone-walling bunch of actors as "that Goon show round the living-room table" (Seven, II:212).

Mary is a pastmaster at entrances, and on her birthday she executes a "comic-provocative, skilfully French-farcical" one (One, II:17). Later on her birthday Miss Bellamy receives a facial "mask" (Two, V:63); still to come is the ghoulish task of "masking" her dead body (Four, I:98). Octavius Browne, Mary's innocent admirer, is shown when he smiles to have a face "rather like a mask of comedy" (Two, II:45). And when Pinky and Bertie attend the grande dame, we learn that Pinky plays "the role of confidante" and Saracen advises about "the final stages of the ritual" (Two, V:64).

Ritual is precisely the right word to characterize Miss Bellamy's Birthday honours; when Old Ninn tactlessly lets Mary's age slip out after the birthday toast and reply, the lead actress is quick to rescue
the sense of catastrophic gaucherie by plunging "the ritual knife" into the cake, thereby achieving "something of the character of a catharsis" (Three, III:85). Indeed the whole party proceeds with a strict sense of theatre which is frequently remarked upon. A lull in the party is compared to those which follow "the lowering of houselights in a crowded theatre" (Three, II:7), and when Mary lets forth a torrent of vitriol behind a glassed wall, it "was like a scene from a silent film" (ibid). For the arrival of the birthday cake, all follows faithfully "according, as it were, to the script" (Three, III:83).

After Richard has had harsh words with his unsuspected mother, he emerges from her boudoir looking like a harrowed melodramatic villain:

Richard came out, white to the lips. He walked past... and pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes. They heard him fetch his breath with a harsh sound that might have been a sob. He stood there for some moments like a man who had lost his bearings and then struck his closed hand twice on the newel post and went quickly downstairs (Three, III:89).

When Mary fails to reappear Pinky confidently declares, "She won't miss her cue" (Three, IV:90) and Gantry unwittingly urges the "show" to its ghastly dénouement: "Last act, ladies and gentlemen. Last act, please!" (91) The guests arrange themselves "like a chorus in grand opera" (ibid.) and when Florence roars in to announce Mary's demise, she does so in a "relentlessly theatrical" manner (:92). Even the element of farce is present, as when Warrender has to shock the intoxicated Dr Harkness into action:

Maurice Warrender said to Florence: "Is it bad?" Her hand to her mouth, she nodded her head up and down like a mandarin.

Warrender took a handful of ice from a wine-cooler and suddenly thrust it down the back of Dr Harkness's collar.
"Come on," he said. Harkness let out a sharp oath. He swung round as if to protest, lost his balance and fell heavily. Florence screamed. (Four, I:94)

This is admirable comic writing and it speaks volumes about the tragically comic nature of Marsh's detective novels with their frequent air of opéra bouffe, often in Gilbert and Sullivan high style.
After Charles Templeton has died, Alleyn tries to get a fix on events and he discovers that Florence had returned to see to Templeton in shock, only to discover a scene "of melodrama. Mrs Plumtree with a poker grasped and upraised, Mr Templeton sprawled along the bed, facing her" (Eight, 1:2.28).

The household has lived precariously, and lest we simply interpret these outbursts of sheer melodrama to human beings under considerable duress, it is well to remember that Mary Bellamy's temperament subsides when she is "bereft of an audience" (Two, 11:43). The fact is that her home has been built on a lie: Colonel Warrender is the father of her son Richard and Mary married Charles Templeton as a more suitable partner (in his earlier days) for her high-class lifestyle. The Pirandellian clash between life and mask inevitably, and Richard's shocked appearance is caused by Mary having disabused him of the long-held pretense that he was an orphan taken under her tender care. As Richard tells -- in Alleyn's words -- his "custom-built poppa", "I remember that Mary once told me it was you who bought them together. What ambivalent roles you both contrived to play. Restoration comedy at its most elaborate" (Seven, 11:209). Mary, in even hiding this truth from her husband Charles Templeton, demonstrates Erving Goffman's definition of poise: "the capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others." Here is yet another repetition of Pirandello's pattern that role-playing is a means to cover shame, and in fact Goffman's essays in Interaction Ritual (1967) explore this problem in a most illuminating manner. Yet there are still other contexts where the circumstance of theatrical murder can be found in Ngaio Marsh's writing.
(ii) The Histriognics of Murder.

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

-- MACBETH (Macbeth V, v [1605-6],
Shakespeare).

"Life is but the span from womb to tomb; a sigh, a smile;
a chill, a fever; a throe of pain, a spasm of volupty;
then a gasping for breath, and the comedy is over, the song
is ended, ring down the curtain, the clown is dead!"

-- NATHANIEL WEST (The Dream Life of Balso Snell [1931]).

"The function of ritual, as I understand it, is to give form
to human life, not in the way of mere surface arrangement, but in depth." So

With these words of Joseph Campbell's Dame Ngaio Marsh would heartily
agree. In fact Dame Ngaio writes of the religious origins of drama:

Theatre began, in Britain as in other European communities,
with religion. Indeed one is tempted to say that all drama
from the initiation rituals of the Australian aborigine to the
Greek tragedies or the Japanese "No" plays, sprang from a religious
impulse... The Japanese "No" plays are, many of them, religious
allegories. The Greek drama evolved from a dithyramb sung in
honour of a god. In ancient Egypt, plays were associated with
the temples of worship. The Hindu stage originated in ritual.
And so on. (51)

Martin Esslin argues that drama is a collective experience and
that,

in ritual as in drama the aim is an enhanced level of consciousness,
a memorable insight into the nature of existence, a renewal of
strength in the individual to face the world. In dramatic terms:
catharsis; in religious terms: communion, enlightenment,
illuminat... Theatres can be described as secular cathedrals, cathedrals as religious stages. (52)

When Esslin refers to Shakespeare's Henry V as the English "national play which comes nearest to a ritual reaffirmation of English nationhood" 53 it is apparent how significant it is that this was the last play that Dame Ngaio has produced. In fact, it is Marsh's conviction that the English are "a very ritualistically gifted nation" -- that they have an extraordinarily "right" sense of ritual 54, and the relevance of this belief to her detective novels becomes clear when we consider a remark by W H Auden.

The detective story writer is... wise to choose a society with an elaborate ritual and to describe this in detail. A ritual is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical in which body and mind, individual will and general laws, are not in conflict. The murderer uses his knowledge of the ritual to commit the crime and can be caught only by someone who acquires an equal or superior familiarity with it. (55)

Marsh has indeed used this approach: we recall the ritual of the jazz group (SBS), the ritual over the old'un (SOJ), the operating theatre routine (NHM), the use of a parish concert with its preordained "order of service" (OTD), the Hamlet-like graveyard ritual in Grave Mistake, the pistol shot in the Unicorn Theatre play (EAM), the deathly pre-planned arrival of a Jeroboam at a birthday party (VM) and, above all, the shared cultic experiences which provide suitable occasions for ritualized murders which we find in Death in Ecstasy, Spinsters in Jeopardy, Off With His Head and Tied Up in Tinsel.

In Death in Ecstasy (1936) readers encounter one of many "queer little religions" (1:9) in the House of the Sacred Flame -- what Alleyn calls a "religio-erotic racket" (SIJ Four, 1:66). The setting is for a bogus quack religion which operates in heroin trafficking under the ironical pretence that "heroin helps to divorce the psyche from the body" psychedelically! (XXIV:210.)
The House of this demented order of neophytes contains a plethora of ill-assorted pagan paraphernalia, such as the combination of Druidical robes, hymns to Pan, odd chanting and a macabre variant of "speaking in tongues" (II:14). It is noteworthy that the sacred flame is described as projecting a "naptha-like theatricality" (II:15) and a "meretricious theatricality" (XII:101). The synthetic Father Jasper Garnette exhorts the faithful to taste Ecstasy by drinking from the flaming cup (:16). The ritual of the cup (an inverted form of Holy Communion) proceeds amidst manifestations of emotional instability and release ("The large lady was whimpering, further along a man's voice cried out incoherently"). Also deeply ironical is Garnette's ejaculation about "The holy madness of the flame", for seconds later Cara Quayne, gibbering, gasps and dies:

Her hands shot outwards as though she offered Garnette the cup. Then they parted inconsequently. The cup flashed as it dropped to the floor. Her face twisted into an appalling grimace. Her body twitched violently. She pitched forward like an enormous doll, jerked twice and then was still (II:17).

Dr Kasbek comes forward to what is now definitively a corpse and the description of what he finds runs like the sober commentary of a mortician:

Cara's eyes, wide open and protuberant, stared straight up at him. At the corners of the mouth were traces of a riny spume. The mouth itself was set, with the teeth clenched and the lips drawn back in a rigid circle. The cheeks were cherry-red, but the rest of the face was livid. She may have been in a state of ecstasy but she was undoubtedly dead. (III:19)

The fact of the matter is that Miss Quayne has just ingested a quantity of cyanide, and she has been murdered -- not for any notion of religious sacrifice -- but to save the scalp of Samuel Ogden whom Cara had suspected as a heroin thief (XXV: 212). The interesting point about Ogden is that he over-acts his chosen role of an American; Nigel Bathgate asks Alleyn, "Is he real? or is he a murderer with unbridled histrionic ambitions? Surely no American was ever so American" (VI:56). That
Roderick Alleyn, besides being bookish and a lover of Shakespeare and
drama in general, is himself something of an actor (like his Elizabethan
namesake) is confirmed when he confides to Nigel his relish for "a
dramatic close to a big case" (XXV:211) and talks about his "beastly
anti-climax depression" (Ibid.: 217).

A strongly theatrical climax is provided for Alleyn in

*Spinsters in Jeopardy* (1953), a novel similarly concerned with a drug-
running outfit masquerading under a fatuous religious potage which in
its cultic details seems to owe something in the Children of the Sun
connection to Chesterton's "The Eye of Apollo" (*The Innocence of Father
Brown* [1911]). This is another story which supports Routley's thesis
that the puritanism of detective fiction finds an outlet in "rationalism
and a suspicion of the supernatural" 56, for the outcome of such tales is
nearly always to debunk the claims of such assorted cults. Alleyn sums
it up when he reflects upon the phenomenon of magic when at the House
of the Silver Goat:

He turned over in his mind all he had read of that curious ex-
pression of human credulity called magic. As it happened he
had been obliged on a former case to dig up evidence of esoteric
ritual and had become fascinated by its witness to man's industry
in the pursuit of a chimera. Hundreds and hundreds of other-
wise intelligent men, he found, had subjected themselves through-
out the centuries to the boredom of memorising and reciting
senseless formulae, to the indignity of unspeakable practices
and the threat of the most ghastly reprisals...Magical
rituals from the dawn of time had taken on the imprint of their
several ages. From the scope and dignity of the Atkadian
Inscriptions to the magnificence of the Graeco-Egyptian Papyri,
from the pious Jewish mysteries to the squalors, brutalities
and sheer silliness of the German pseudo-Faustian cults. From
the Necromancer of the Coliseum to the surprisingly fresh folk-
lorishness of the English genre: each had its peculiar character and
its own formula of frustration. And alongside them direct like
a bastard brother ran the cult of Satanism, the imbecile horrors
of the Black Mass, the Amatory Mass and the Mortuary Mass
(Eleven, V:223-24).

Alleyn, like his wife Troy, is a humanist and an agnostic with
a real respect for believers of more orthodox faiths. When voyaging
incognito on the Cape Farewell, Alleyn strikes up a warm friendship
with an Anglican priest, Father Jourdain. When Jourdain calls himself
"a spiritual policeman" Alleyn says he respects the point of view, adding "Sir, I am disposed to trust you" (Singing in the Shrouds (Five, iii:105). Later Jourdain tells Alleyn:

"I'm a priest: an Anglo-Catholic priest. I hear confessions... One never stops being dumbfounded at the unexpectedness of sin."

Alleyn said: "I suppose in a way the same observation might apply to my job." (Six, iii:123)

When Jourdain celebrates Communion on board ship Alleyn, true to his premises, listens and watches from the back and "not for the first time, felt his own lack of acceptance to be tinged with a faint regret" (Eight, I:155). It is Harry Grove (the murderer) who jokes with Alleyn, "You've missed your vocation. You'd have been a wow on the receiving side of the confessional grille" (Death at the Dolphin 7, iii:170). It is true that Alleyn behaves like a Christian gentleman and he is quick to rescue the Church from the charge of superstition which rests upon all "mumbo-jumbo" cults.

The dramatic close to Spinsters in Jeopardy is ushered in by an electrical storm -- "the Côte d'Azur, inclined always to the theatrical, became melodramatic and... staged a thunderstorm" (Ten, II:192).

Alleyn is on the hunt for details surrounding the murder of Grizel Locke and this theatrical storm has a Shakespearean ring, as a prelude to retribution. In Edmund's hypocritical words, "the revenging gods 'gainst parricides did all the thunder bend" (King Lear II,i). Marsh could well be speaking through Verity Preston, to whom it occurs

that writers like Ibsen and Dickens -- unallied in any other respect -- were right to make storms, snow, fog and fire the companions of human disorders. Shakespeare too, she thought. We deprive ourselves aesthetically when we forgo the advantages of symbolism. (Grave Mistake V, II:134).

Marsh has used this retributive motif (some connect it with the Flood of Noah in Genesis) in several novels. Thunder is in the air in Death at the Dolphin, Clutch of Constables, When in Rome and one also recalls the down-
pours after the murders in Artists in Crime, Scales of Justice and "Morepork". By far the best exemplar comes in Dead Water when, at the festival of the green lady organized by Miss Cost and others, Marsh sketches the gathering for the celebration of the miracle cures with the cultic ritual as the centrepiece. "Thunderous clouds were massed in the north-west" (DW 4, 1:75); the ominous elements add to the drama and general sense of expectation. A hymn is used sacrilegiously (:77) and after Wally's inarticulate opener and the dumb show there bursts "a really formidable roll of thunder (:79). Miss Emily Cost, inheritor of the Portcarrow Island and a vigorous opponent of this lunatic gathering, begins to protest when:

Major Barrimore had risen to his feet with an oath. At the same moment there was a blinding flash of lightning, followed immediately by a stentorian thunder-clap, a deluge of rain, and a shout of uncontrollable laughter from Dr Maine (:79).

The gathering collapses in a frenetic rush for cover from the "holocaust"; Miss Cost screams "It's a judgment" and the text of her play falls and lies disregarded in the mud (4, 11:80) suddenly created by this "pentateuchal deluge" (:81). The treatment of this village play is mildly reminiscent of Miss La Trobe's ritualistic play in Virginia Woolf's Between the Acts (1941). It is a perfect summer afternoon for a pageant and Albert the village idiot plays his appointed role as does Marsh's Wally Treherne. The La Trobe play argues that "We act different parts, but are the same" and Miss La Trobe holds a mirror up to her bewildered audience to underline the point. For a short period in the middle of the play a summer shower falls ("Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping") but when it stops, Miss La Trobe (unlike Miss Cost) can declare to herself that "Nature once more had taken her part." In Dead Water Miss Cost is murdered after the abortive festival and Alleyn, on seeing her corpse, cannot help but muse:
Whether here, singly, or multiplied to the monstrous litter of a battlefield, or strewn idiotically about the wake of a nuclear explosion, or dangling with a white cap over a cy-anosed tongue—protruding mask; the destruction of one human being by another was the unique offence. It was the final outrage" (5, I:95).

To return to Spinsters, the murder of Miss Locke was witnessed as Alleyn sped past the Château on his rail journey to Roqueville. He describes what he saw to the scandalized Raoul:

"One only saw a shape against a window blind and then for a second, against the window itself. The man, if it was a man, had already struck and had withdrawn the weapon which he held aloft. The impression was melodramatic. Over-dramatic. One might have believed it was a charade" (Nine, II:172).

When Alleyn arrests Baradi (the man alluded to above) a train roars by, allowing a makeshift real-life action replay which enables Alleyn to reconstruct what he saw upon Baradi briefly before two startled men in the railway carriage ("Their images in the glass talked excitedly and gestured" [Twelve, IV:248]).

It is in Chapter Twelve ("Eclipse of the Sun") that Alleyn attends the secret ritual to expose Oberon and Baradi.

To Alleyn the scene was preposterous and phony. He remembered Troy's comment on the incident of the train window: hadn't she compared it to bad cinematography? Even the ritual, for what it was worth, was bogus: a vamped up synthesis, he thought, of several magic formulae (Twelve, II:235).

As the Silver Goat appears to the spaced-out acolytes in a whirl of pyrotechnic effects, Alleyn demythologizes the whole crass affair to himself:

There was a blare of light, for perhaps a second, literally blinding in its intensity. "Flash-powder", thought Alleyn. "The Egyptian must be remarkably busy." When his eyes had adjusted themselves, the goat had disappeared and in its place the sun-burst blazed on the altar. "Car batteries", thought Alleyn, "perhaps. Flex soldered at the terminals. Well done, Mahomet or somebody" (:239).

The Rites then take on "the character of unbridled phallicism and rocket to the "point of climax" (ibid.). The real climax is unexpected because when Baradi removes Raoul's robe chanting "Behold! The Bride!"
where, like an illustration from *La Vie Parisienne*, Mr Oberon's victim should have been discovered -- there stood Raoul in his underpants, black slippers and Ginny Taylor's gloves (Twelve, III:240)!

After Alleyn reveals the exposure to his unheavenly hosts and has subdued Baradi after they fought each other "like a couple of frenzied monks" (IV:242), the Sûreté commissaire arrives, as Alleyn says, "most punctually upon... cue" (:245). In Maurice Shadbolt's words Dame Ngaio:

sees the detective story, at its best, as just another form of theatre. "The most important thing in theatre", she says, "is structure -- and orchestration. In the detective story I use my sense of these things, carefully orchestrating the climaxes as I would in producing a play." (60)

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In Off With His Head (1956), the title of which seems a dim echo of *Alice in Wonderland*, the opening chapter reveals "the shell of a Norman castle, theatrically erected against a leaden sky" (One, I:9). It is Christmas-time, the Winter solstice period and a matter of days before the annual South Mardian Sword Wednesday Dance.

Marsh, with characteristic honesty, admits as one source for this novel Violet Alford's little book, *Introduction to English Folklore* (London, 1952). Alford remarks that the sword Dance is "a Midwinter seasonal ceremony" bound in its setting to the Winter Solstice time. Marsh's Dance of the Five Sons is, she admits, "a purely imaginary synthesis combining in most unlikely profusion the elements of several dances and mumming plays" (Author's note), yet there are many realistic touches in its treatment. The Guiser (or "Disguised One") is the father of the sons and he acts the mummer's role of a masked buffoon as the Fool or Old Man. Likewise the Betty is the familiar "man-in-woman's clothes."  

Shadbolt remarks on the legacy of Shakespeare's *Lear* on this novel where,
her interest undiminished, she tried to trace the origins of this Shakespearean masterpiece in the mass of European Folk-lore, and from that quest came *Off With His Head*, a story many consider her finest, with violence arriving nastily among the ancient rituals of an English village folk-play. (63)

In fact the Lear connection comes with Dr Otterly's discovery that Lear is the "stupendous blossoming" of Sir James Frazer's theme of "The King of the Wood, the Green Man, The Fool, The Old Man Persecuted by his Young" (Two, 11:36). Alleyn perceives that the ritual Death and Resurrection of the Fool (First and Second Dances) ties up with "the old mystery of sacrifice" with "the promise of renewal behind it" (Six, 11:103). Alleyn later asks Otterly if the concept of the ritual dance derives from Frazer's King of the Sacred Grove. The Doctor replies, "Certainly. And the Dionysian play about the Titans who killed their old man" (Seven, 1:115). The point, of course, is that in this present instance one slightly demented and frustrated son literally does kill his old man. Superintendent Carey describes old William Andersen's corpse as "like a kind of doll that the head had come off of. There was the body, sort of doubled up, and there was the head two feet away, grinning, which was right nasty...." (Five, 1:75-6).

Camilla Campion, a trainee actress visiting the Andersens, says the whole thing is "like something out of Webster or Marlow: horror-plus" (Six, 1:95) and Alleyn tells Fox, "This case smacks of the Elizabethan. And I don't altogether mean Hamlet or Lear... But those earlier plays of violence when people kill each other in a sort of quintessence of spleen and other people cheer each other up by saying things like: 'And now, my lord, to leave these doleful dumps.' " (Eleven, 111:215)

Predictably, Alleyn finds the creator of this revenge-tragedy homicide through a reconstruction of the ceremony.

The doleful dumps recur in *Tied Up in Tinsel* (1972), yet another Winter Solstice setting. Again it is just before Christmas, and this
juxtaposition of the Yuletide season and murder recalls Dickens' final and unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Edmund Wilson notes that:

> The Christmas season itself, of which Dickens has been laureate, which he has celebrated so often with warm charity, candid hopes and hearty cheer, is now the appointed moment for the murder of an uncle of his nephew. (64)

Marsh's fascination with Christmas is apparent in these novels and in "Moonshine", "Death on the Air", her *The Christmas Tree* (with its strongly ritualized flavour) and *A Unicorn for Christmas*.

The central ritual in *Tied Up in Tinsel* is described in Chapter 4 ("The Tree and the Druid"). Colonel Forrester is to act, not Santa Claus, but as a Druid. Hilary Bill-Tasman tells Troy that "at Halberds, St Nicholas or Santa Claus or whatever you like to call the Teutonic old person, is replaced by an ancient and more authentic figure: the great precursor of the Winter Solstice observances" (1, 4:24-25).

This novel fairly buzzes with references to "scenes", "roles", "death masks", "stage-management", "entrances" and so on. Bill-Tasman puts on an annual Christmas day party for the children and their elders in the Vale region. When we learn about the kissing bough suspended from a chandelier (2, 3:46) and the fact that the "Druid" arrives with "a great crown of mistletoe" (4, 1:75), another parallel with Frazer can be found. Sir James Frazer was fascinated with what he called "drama of human existence" 65, and in the concluding volume of *The Golden Bough* (1911-15), *Balder the Beautiful*, Frazer relates the myth of the Priest-King of the Sacred Grove who was invulnerable to destruction, save by a bough of mistletoe. Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble note that:

> He had succeeded his title by murdering his predecessor with a sprig of the mistletoe bough which grew high up on the tree, and he, in turn, was destined to be murdered by a successful challenger in the same manner. (66)

This is in fact the central myth of Frazer's work -- a work which has deeply fascinated Dame Ngaio Marsh. The dramatic link comes when
Cressida "Tottenham", a female suitor to Bill-Tasman, arrives for Christmas. Hilary tells Troy that Cressida has been "to a dramatic academy of sorts and thence into something she calls organic-expressivism. I have tried to point out that this is a meaningless term but she doesn't seem to mind" (1, 3:20). When Troy later quizzes Cressida about Organic-Expressivism she replies that it cannot be defined -- "An O-E Exposure is one thing for each of us and another for each of the audience. One simply hopes there will be a spontaneous emotional release" (3, 3:68). Later Hilary continues to jib at this extraordinary acronym when Cressida says that Hilary's Uncle Bert seems to come out of Genet:

"My darling girl, what dreadful nonsense you talk! Have you so much as read Genet?" "Hilly! For heaven's sake -- he's where O-E begins."

Hilary said with unusual acerbity: "And I'm afraid he's where I leave off" (4, 3:90).

The remark about Genet and "O-E" certainly seems far-fetched but the reference to this follower of Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty", who writes turbulent dramas of ritualistic violence and unnatural passion (e.g., The Maids), may be a tell-tale clue to Cressida's culpability as a filial murderess, for we are to learn that she has murdered her father (Colonel Forrester's manservant Alfred Mout) and literally acted in his place as the Druid! Her father revealed to her that she is his illegitimate daughter and no fit equal to Bill-Tasman on the social register. Marsh has recorded her own revulsion at Genet's anxious vision:

"Already in the anger of the young men we begin to hear whining noises. M. Genet's black plays may soon look merely grey. He may even achieve, before he is forgotten, his full intention: he may end by disgusting us. " (67)

Cressida, a fully qualified femme fatale, drops misleading hints and makes "a dead set" at Alleyn (5, 3:103); she later calls out to him, "Hullo, Heart-throb!" (7, 3:160) Mrs Forrester has called Cressida "that yellow doll of Hil-ary's" (4, 3:84) and when she charges out of her bedroom in a cat-induced frenzy in her short, "diaphanous nightgown" it is
remarked how Cressida "looked like a pin-up girl adapted to some kind of sick comedy" (8, 3:177). We learn that her father has acted towards Cressida as a totally unsuspected individual, just as did Magwitch to the socially aspiring Pip (Great Expectations).

When Alleyn catches Hilary's servants out as they secretly pull the sledge with Moul's dead body aboard, the scene is described as a "drama of darkness" (8, 4:187) and when the men scatter in panic they wave "their arms like characters in some kind of extravaganza. To make the resemblance more vivid, they were now bathed in light as if from an off-stage spot" (9, 1:190). As Alleyn tells of his findings, tension is noted in his "audience" (9, 2:205) and that is a significant point at which to consider the next element in Ngaio Marsh's conspicuously theatrical vision.

The motif of role-playing and acting is very prevalent in Marsh's work. Notable examples are Lord Pastern with his "unquenchable passion for self dramatisation" (SBS Ten, 3:212) or the Boomer who, when displaying his vigorously charismatic presence at the Tribal Court, is described to look "like an effigy of himself" (BHP Four, IV:96). Likewise, Jacques Doré quips that he is "a bit of a character. I have not the talent to make a character of myself for the people who sit in front, so instead I play to actors. A wheel within wheels. For twenty years I have built up my role of confidant and now, if I wanted to I couldn't leave it off" (ON III, 1:46).

However the most superlative actor of all is Roderick Alleyn and it is therefore highly droll when Mr Merryman refers to Edward Alleyn, adding to the Superintendent, "It is, presumably, too much to expect that you should have so much as heard of the founder of Dulwich College" (SIS Eleven, 11:238-39).
When Alleyn is at Middleton in New Zealand he recognizes in himself "a kind of nostalgia, a feeling of intense sympathy and kinship with the stage" (VM XVII:154). He also asks himself, "Is my mere presence in the stalls a cue for homicide? May I not visit the antipodes without elderly theatre magnates having their heads bashed in by jeroboams of champagne before my very eyes?" (VM X:48.) As it is explained years later in Death at the Dolphin:

Alleyn was not altogether unused to the theatrical scene or to theatre people. He had been concerned in four police investigations in which actors had played -- and "played" had been the operative word -- leading roles. As a result of these cases he was sardonically regarded at the Yard as something of an expert on the species (5, I:94).

The Assistant Commissioner of Police remarks, "you are the man for the job: what with your theatrical past and your dotage on the Bard" (:95). A more unlikely qualification in real investigation than the latter is hard to imagine, yet somehow that is unimportant. The actress Camilla Campion decides that Alleyn has "star quality" (OWH Seven, I:122) and it is clear that Inspector Fox plays the role of comic foil to this handsome lead. Richard Levin defines a dramatic foil as "a devalued background added to bring out the superior qualities of 'centrepiece' characters belonging to a very different order of being -- to repel them from its level and so reinforce our sense of their elevation above the everyday world." 68 As will be obvious from the discussion of Fox in Chapter Three, Ngaio Marsh very sensibly refrained from creating an obtuse Watson or side-kick either in Fox or with Nigel Bathgate. Fox is a "perfect confidant " 69 in Betterson's words.

However Alleyn remains the "star" and he manages frequent dramatic entrances, like the one in Opening Night:

"I won't be gagged! It drove my Uncle Ben to despair and I don't care who knows it." It was upon this line that Alleyn, as if he had mastered one of the major points of stage technique, made his entrance up-stage and centre (VII, IV:122).
After the murder in *Black As He's Painted* Alleyn arrives and in some "curious and indefinable fashion he brought a feeling of refreshment with him rather like that achieved by a star whose delayed entry, however quietly executed, lifts the scene and quickens the attention of his audience" (Five, II:112). In *False Scent* Alleyn arrives to clear the suspects and stands on the hearth rug "like the central figure in some ill-assembled conversation piece" (Eight, III:241). Alleyn also thinks very frequently of *Hamlet*, perhaps his favourite Shakespeare play. When eavesdropping on one occasion he observes wryly to Fox, "Next stop, with Polonius behind the arras in a bedroom" (Six, II:174) and when he is asked to give advice by Miss Destiny Meade, Alleyn reminds himself "of a mature Hamlet" (DAD 9, IV:216). Right at the commencement of Alleyn's fictional appearances he chides Nigel for his "theatricality" (AMLD IV:50) and when proposing to reconstruct the Murder Game calls it "Hamlet's old stunt" (XV:177) and the "last act" of the drama (:182).

In *Colour Scheme* (1943) Alleyn disguises himself as a Mr Septimus Falls as a cover for his espionage inquiry:

> He looked to be a middle-aged Englishman, tall but bent forward at a wooden angle and leaning heavily on his stick. He was good-looking, well-mannered, and inclined to be bookishly facetious (CS Six, III:108).

Alleyn is dramatizing -- literally projecting forth in exaggerated form -- himself and some of his quirkier attributes to a larger-than-life level. Falls discourses leanedly with the actor Gaunt about *Hamlet* and suddenly jerks back with a "yelp" induced by a pretended spasm of pain, then ironically refers to a Nazi actor as "A ridiculous performer" (Seven, III:124)!

In *When in Rome* (1970) Alleyn, this time on a narcotics investigation, feigned symptoms of drug addiction such as repeated yawning and he "affected restlessness and discontent" (WIR 5, 3:150). The author terms this Alleyn's "display of 'withdrawal' symptoms" (:151) and it enables him to gain heroin and cocaine from Toni's pad in Rome for yet another conclusive exposure of vice and villainy.
Alleyn, however, should not be considered the only sometimes false actor in the Marsh novels. On the contrary, there is a congruence of the detective and the criminal as actors -- those who seem but may not be what they project. In this perspective (a further legacy from Pirandello) crime and its investigation are both conceived as games, albeit games in deadly earnest.

This idea of the criminal as an actor has very honourable antecedents, not least in Lady Macbeth's charge to Macbeth to present the memory of the dead Banquo in,

eminence, both with eye and tongue.  
Unsafe the while, that we
Must lave our honours in these flattering streams,
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are (Macbeth III, ii).

The imagery of masking is very potent in Macbeth and Horatio speaks of "detecting" the false Claudius through the play in Hamlet (III, iii). On a much humbler level, the murderer in Bentley's Trent's Last Case (1913) dressed up and played the role of the murdered man, and Philip Trent observes that this person must have had "considerable aptitude for mimicry and acting" (Ch. Eleven).

Alleyn describes Alfred Meyer's murderer, George Mason as "a superb actor" (VM, XXV:219) -- the dyspeptic and grossly shocked long-standing pal being his chosen role. Similarly, Valmai Seacliff, Marsh's prototype of the literal femme fatale, is a "past-mistress" of good entrances (AIC, XX:249) and tries to convey the image that "she never moved anywhere without a masculine satellite" (X:123). Miss Seacliff retains poise when nearly caught out and makes convincing signs of illness.

The murderer in Opening Night is a plagiarist "playwright" ("Was it George Moore who said that the difference between his quotation and those of the next man was that he left out the inverted commas?"), XI, II:189). John James Rutherford is being blackmailed by Clark Bennington who threatens to reveal Rutherford's literary theft, and when the troubled cast discuss
the problematic scenario, Rutherford stresses the suicidal interpretation -- "For a man who had decided to shuffle off this mortal coil he behaved very sensibly" (VII, IV:118). Rutherford's detached air is suspicious, and he is a "theatrical" in the very worst sense with his insensitive quips ("All right, Thalia, have a good cry" :119). The author describes Rutherford as "a figure of high fantasy", and Alleyn thinks of him as an ideal Falstaff figure with his "what's cooking, my hearty's?" and "expression of extreme impertinence" (IX, III:162). Yet Rutherford does the manly thing, dispensing with himself after writing a strangely jocular confessional letter to Alleyn which closes with anticipation of Claudio's "on the edge of the viewless winds" (XI, II:191).

In Death at the Dolphin (1966) the turbulent actor Harry Grove calls himself "a rank outsider" to the public school network and to conventional life in general) and kills a caretaker at the Dolphin Theatre whilst getting away with some Shakespearean relics which he had just stolen. Thenceforth, unperturbed, Grove to a party where he played its "life and soul" (DAD 11, I:248). In When in Rome the Baron Van Der Veghel, a blackmailed accomplice to murder, is described as having a mask (9, 3:277) and his wife the Baroness is shown to have played a "part in the [homicidal] performance" (10, 1:283).

But it is with the murderers Foljambe (Clutch of Constables) and Bruce Gardener (Grave Mistake) that the real actors are presented. Alleyn describes Foljambe's talent "for type-casting himself" (COC, 4:72); that he is a "masterpiece" of mimicry (1:9). At the end of the novel Alleyn confirms Troy's question that "Caley Bard" was "All an act" (10, One:221).

In Grave Mistake Sybil Foster's gardener, with the ironical name Gardener (the first possible hint of his falseness), is a similar specimen of the histrionic criminal. When Alleyn has found his man, this murderer is shown still bearing
the insecure persona -- of his chosen role: red-gold beard, fresh mouth, fine torso, loud voice, pawky turn of speech: the straightforward Scottish soldier-man with a heart of gold (GM IX, IV:244).

Alleyn tells Verity Preston that Gardener has long cultivated his air of "the pawky Scot. By and large", said Alleyn, "a loss to the stage. I can see him stealing the show in superior soap" (IX, V:250). Gardener over-reached himself with his synthetic Scots act, well illustrating Emerson's maxim, "Society is a masked ball, where everyone hides his real character, and reveals it by hiding." 70

This could well serve as an aperçu for Dame Ngaio Marsh's fictional vision.

+ + + + +
CONCLUSION:

THE "ACCIDENTAL WOMAN"?
THANKS IN OLD AGE

Thanks in old age - thanks ere I go,
For health, the midday sun, the impalpable air -
for life, mere life,
For precious ever-lingering memories, (of you my
mother dear - you father...)
For all my days - not those of peace alone - the
days of war the same,
For gentle words, caresses, gifts from foreign
lands,
For shelter, wine and meat - for sweet appreciation,
(You distant, dim unknown - or young or old - count-
less, unspecified, readers belov'd,
We never met, and ne'er shall meet - and yet our
souls embrace, long, close and long)...

-WALT WHITMAN
(Leaves of Grass Book XXXIV
[1855].)

* * * * *

ALEX McDOWELL: Would it be fair to say that things
came to you rather than you going to them? - the
appearance of Allan Wilkie, for example, or your
trip to England; even that your friends decided for
you.
NGAIO MARSH: Yes, yes I think that would be fair
enough. Things did rather fall into my lap about
that time, particularly the visit of Mr Wilkie.
McDOWELL: ...Almost everything has happened to you
by accident!
MARSH: Yes, really it's true. The accidental woman.
("Three Several Quests", NZBC 1966)

* * * * *

Dame Ngaio Marsh is unmistak-ably a Living Legend. It
cannot but be otherwise.

After a rich and varied lifetime in which she has written
some thirty-one highly successful novels of detective fiction, exercised a good deal of her many-sided talents and energy in the visual arts and, according to some observers, having almost single-handedly revived Shakespearean production in New Zealand, Ngaio Marsh may be deemed to have established a very secure position for herself in her nation's heritage.

As Frank Sargeson may be said to be our Grand Old Man of New Zealand letters, so Dame Ngaio admirably conforms to the role of our Grande Dame of the arts in general. This fact was made apparent when she was chosen to speak at the 1979 New Zealand Wattie Book Awards.

Marsh's great service to theatre was that, by earning her living quite honourably in writing her detective novels, she was able to direct scores of students for so many years without charging fees. Elric Hooper (whose first production with Dame Ngaio was as the Fool in King Lear in 1956) remarks on Marsh as a great energizer; that although she lacked a strictly analytical training, Ngaio Marsh brought an instinctive grasp of the physiological aspects of acting to bear on her productions. Jonathan Elsom agrees that Dame Ngaio's gift was her extraordinary enthusiasm and her remarkable gift of conveying a sense of energy. Hooper adds that Dame Ngaio's great merit as a Shakespearean producer was her sense of dramatic structure.
Walter Pater was mentioned in Chapter One, and surely another notable feature of Marsh's life has been its symmetry. In Black Beech and Honeydew Dame Ngaio has written:

I have suggested, without any claim to originality, that in most lives there is a repetitive pattern; that incidents which on first occurrence seem to bear no relation to this pattern often turn out to be completely integrated and to have been merely waiting offstage for their entrance. (IX, III:209.)

This is reminiscent of the belief of the aesthetes that a life should be a work of art. Maugham once described this in the image of a Persian rug:

As the weaver elaborated his pattern for no end but the pleasure of his aesthetic sense, so might a man live his life...so that he might look at his life, that it made a pattern (Of Human Bondage [1915], CVI).

Ngaio Marsh summarizes her own life pattern of a dual career in terms of "a constant though irregular rhythm. So many years in New Zealand, so many in England or abroad. Half the year in the theatre and half writing detective fiction" (Black Beech X, II:228).

It is apparent that as an individual, Dame Ngaio has always been highly creative. She bears a strong resemblance in this respect to her character Verity Preston:

She had finished the overhaul of her play and posted it off to her agents. It was not unusual, when work-in-hand had been dealt with and she was cleaned out, for her to experience a nervous impulse to start off at once on something new (Grave Mistake V, II:134).
Marsh is one of those fortunate individuals for whom her life is her work; ironically after dispensing with Grave Mistake and "Morepork" Dame Ngaio almost immediately began thinking about Photofinish. There can really be no stasis for such a person.

It is also significant that Marsh always has to be in control of the material at hand: she either enjoyed painting, producing (the top job in theatre) or writing novels in the front-rank of her field. Norman Mailer links great generals with novelists - "for what is a novelist but a general who sends his troops across fields of paper?" (The Prisoner of Sex [Boston: Little Brown, 1971], p.153.) This may cause us to ask if Dame Ngaio may be creatively unable to be subordinate.

The point about Marsh taking "lucky" breaks is that while it is undeniable that things coalesced magnificently in her favour, she was not obliged to grab at them. Aside from Marsh's wilful initiative it is worth noting how, with the exception of her writing (a very lonely and private activity), Dame Ngaio always worked in groups - from painting with The Group (a symbolic title in itself) to the Wilkie tour (a collective experience of kindred types), to her first visit to England which was mediated by the worder of Lampreys.

Noël Coward was a legendary figure about whom a "myth-
ology" was created: that of the suave ageless and urbane wit dressed in silk robes and evening slippers. Certainly aspects of Marsh's life when frequently remarked in the media tend to take on a legendary quality. A good example of this is her account of how she began with the Wilkie Company, how she wrote her first detective novel and how she began working with the students at Canterbury. This legendary quality is accentuated by her poor memory for dates and the order of events (something she admits she has always had) which, with Dame Ngaio's air of the spirited raconteuse, tends to blur the hard outlines of her experience.

Also, apart from the exquisite symmetry of her life, Dame Ngaio values/orderly world. Her fictional predilection for novels which are written in a genre which celebrates what Aydelotte calls an "ordered world", with her focus on proper diction, the upper class milieu, civilized Europe, and the ritual order of countryside communities in England speaks for itself. This leads some of her countrymen to see in Marsh an intimidating woman, a stringent arbiter in matters of taste and manners. Others may argue that Alleyn and Troy are - in Jungian terms - projections of Marsh's "animus" and "anima" and that in writing about them she experiences something of a surrogate marriage.

What we might call the "Myth of Ngaio Marsh" is wonder-
fully captured in Christopher Isherwood's imaginary portrait of a Miss Belmare:

She was a formidable, mannish figure with a loud commanding voice who wore starched blouses and a small steel padlock inside her stiff collar... She had painted the frescoes of the Mortmere village hall (Lions and Shadows [1938], Ch.111).

On this showing Ngaio Marsh is demonstrably the supreme artist of Cashmere, where she still lives. Yet the public impression many have of her is of a virtual fire-breathing virago, a disconcertingly masculine, trouser-suited, somewhat eccentric individual with a magisterial voice who roars around Christchurch's Summit Road, taking fast corners in her black E-type Jaguar.

The reality, of course, is that Dame Ngaio Marsh is actually a shy, reticent and charmingly feminine woman with innocent ambitions to produce a little more in the theatre, to take a flight on the Concorde and write a few more of her inimitable detective novels. As an English reviewer of one of her novels wrote: "Long may she reign!"
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