

# "Everything thickens": Ngaio Marsh and an Intermedial *Macbeth* from New Zealand

Megan Murray-Pepper, Independent Scholar

---

## Abstract

This paper explores the Shakespearean intersections in the works of New Zealand theater director and detective writer Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982) in the context of adaptation strategies within "settler cultures" and with *Macbeth* as a focus. Archival records of the New Zealand theater demonstrate the similarities between Marsh's productions of *Macbeth* in 1946 and 1962; the dramaturgy of the witches in particular distinguishes her stagings in the wider landscape of Anglophone production. Subsequently, Marsh reproduces and magnifies these productions in her final novel *Light Thickens* (1982). In reading closely the elements of montage, sensory crossover, and lexical repetition in Marsh's prose, I elaborate the precise formal relations of the intermedial approach that is at the heart of her aesthetic practices of adaptation. Where Marsh's multiple Shakespearean works appear to pursue a kind of inert repetition that reveals the play's essence, the play that "is," I argue that her work is characterized by a distinctive and interconnected accretion of *Macbeth* "performances." Culturally speaking, her multifocal engagement with Shakespeare is symptomatic of a settler culture that frequently experienced — through the complex dynamics of British affiliations — a sense of entitlement to or ownership of the Shakespearean canon.

---

Edith Ngaio Marsh (1895-1992) was one of New Zealand's primary cultural practitioners of the twentieth century: she wrote thirty-two detective novels and produced more than thirty Shakespeare plays — among many others — across six decades. To her actors in New Zealand she was a "spectacular creature," with "marvellous extravagance of vision" (Edmond 1989, 217; Thompson 1980, 75); to her readership around the world, one of the four renowned "Queens of Crime" who supplied regular investigative and frequently theatrical adventures for her detective Roderick Alleyn (named for the prominent sixteenth-century actor Edward Alleyn). Her lifestyle entailed a fairly regular pattern of movement between her home country and London. This peripatetic rhythm echoes that between theater direction and detective writing, a practice in which Shakespeare operated throughout her career as an anchoring thread and as a generic interface. Her practices of Shakespearean staging and of theatrical business within her novels are among the most substantial

aspects of her work — and one of the most significant engagements with Shakespeare in New Zealand's cultural history.

This essay reads closely Marsh's multiple versions of *Macbeth*, using detailed analysis of a select play to explore the characteristics of Marsh's Shakespearean productions and prose adaptation, as well as the mechanisms through which they were disseminated both to New Zealand and to global audiences or readerships. In what follows, I read the archival records of her productions of the play in 1946 (and touring 1947) and 1962 alongside her final novel, *Light Thickens* (1982), in order to posit that Marsh develops a characteristically *intermedial* aesthetic — that is, one that invokes and shifts between different modes of expression in seeking to capture the Shakespearean "essence" that she firmly theorized. At the same time, this intermediality is itself suggestive of the unstable nature of such theatrical texts. I suggest that this analysis is important on three counts: for expanding histories of Shakespearean performance in the wider Anglophone world; for the examination of Shakespearean adaptation in its formal, generic aspects; and for the exploration of the ways in which such strategies are produced by specific cultural locations, in this case of a settler society.

One of Marsh's principal achievements lay in the successful regeneration and popularization of Shakespearean performance in New Zealand for a local, national, and sometimes international audience, from her first production of *Hamlet* in 1943 to *Henry V* in 1970. While there was limited professional theater in New Zealand until the 1960s, in the energetic mid-century era of widespread and enthusiastic amateur theater, Marsh gained prominence as a producer and director.<sup>1</sup> She worked both with the University Drama Society at Canterbury College (then a constituent part of the University of New Zealand), and with repertory societies in Christchurch in New Zealand's South Island to produce both modern and Shakespearean plays, touring them on a number of occasions across the country and in Australia. These substantial dramatic efforts were pursued with astute reference to British traditions of production in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, Marsh was equally implicated in a network of artistic practitioners in the closely knit New Zealand creative scene. Her imaginative and exciting productions of *Macbeth* and other Shakespearean plays therefore have a substantial contribution to make to the wider history of Shakespeare performance across what historian James Belich has designated the "Anglo-world" (Belich 2009).

The theater was not the first outlet for Marsh's creative talents, however. In embarking on detective writing during a trip to London in 1931, Marsh — like many aspiring writers of the Thirties — was engaging with an increasingly popular genre. Its recently codified nature, for example in the hands of the "Detection Club" in Britain, seemed to offer significant scope for

ingenuity and invention in a period retrospectively dubbed the "Golden Age." Marsh's *A Man Lay Dead* was published in 1934 and followed by a steady sequence of "whodunits," only four of which are set in New Zealand itself. Though many of her novels (*Light Thickens* included) broadly conform to the conventions of the classic detective novel, P. D. James suggests their longevity is probably more a consequence of her skills in characterization and in the evocation of a specific social milieu — qualities that might have enabled her to work effectively outside the detective genre (James 2009, 101; Symons 1974, 158).<sup>2</sup> The social world most expressively brought to light in her books is a theatrical one.

In *Light Thickens* (1982), the final novel of a long career, the interlinking of Marsh's two principal artistic practices — theater direction and detective writing — receives its fullest expression, as Shakespearean theater takes center stage in the novel, and in fact dominates over the rather elongated detective pattern. A vivid treatment of theatrical life, superstition and stagecraft, the novel re-embodies the New Zealand productions of *Macbeth* in a fictional London landscape. In representing Shakespeare's *Macbeth* across several aesthetic genres and translating it from the stage into the detective novel, Marsh provides a powerful example of Shakespeare as creative process as well as a vigorous component of a double cultural identity.

### Marsh's *Macbeth*(s) on stage

In an essay of 1964 entitled "The Quick Forge," Marsh reveals her belief in an inner essence of Shakespeare's plays that can withstand any vagaries of interpretation, production, and spectacle:

There they stand, rocklike through their four centuries. The tides of accumulated scholarship, theatrical fashions, veering preferences, wash over them and leave their deposits. Garrick plays Lear in a tie-wig, Kean reveals Richard Crookback by flashes of lightning. Irving makes a gentleman of Shylock and Beerbohm Tree herds un-cooperative livestock across the bank whereon the wild thyme grows. William Poel returns to the strict Elizabethan playhouse and someone gives a rendering of *Twelfth Night* on rollerskates . . . In New Zealand, from time to time, a young player struggling with a secondary part, exclaims in astonishment, 'But this is real!' and, you may say, utters the one irrefutable comment upon Shakespeare. (Marsh 1964b, 39-40)

This passage shows not only Marsh's own thorough acquaintance with English traditions of Shakespeare performance, but her own aversion to an emerging tradition of radical and even burlesque productions, condemned in shorthand as "*Twelfth Night* on rollerskates." In this conception, the play *is*: she and her actors must reveal it. If "the savagery, the terrors and the

beauty of the language . . . are expressions of the very elements that disturb the modern world," then any radical adaptation is unnecessary (Marsh, Undated-A). The repetitions of staging and of poetic rhythms in her own *Macbeths* reflect her conception of a *truthful* exposition whose purpose is rather to express in perpetuity, and without overt localization, "the pathology of violence, the sour taste of murder, the sick idiocy of ambition" (Marsh 1962a, 10).

However, tracing the staging, the movements, and the interpretations of Marsh's *Macbeth* in its three manifestations, from stage to stage to page, suggests that what at first appears to be a curiously inert intermediality is revealed to be a dynamic (and sometimes unstable) process that actually undermines Marsh's avowed essentialism — since it always points to *another* version of the play. By comparing the prompt books of her *Macbeth* productions in 1946 and 1962 with the production of the same play as it occupies her final novel, *Light Thickens*, it is possible to construct an archaeology of performance which reflects Marsh's theatrical *ideals* as much as her actual practice.<sup>3</sup> This close reading first briefly situates Marsh in relation to Anglophone production of the middle of the twentieth century.

Her first production of the play in 1946/1947, which toured New Zealand's four major cities of Christchurch, Wellington, Auckland, and Dunedin, impressed critics as it "unrolled with the continuous action of the cinema film" and was steeped in "reds and earthy greys" (Lewis 1991, 208). Marsh's stage designs take on significance when compared to accounts of the very successful *Macbeth* directed by Glyn Byam Shaw at Stratford in 1955, starring Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, which is considered a landmark in twentieth-century productions. In one account, Shaw's sets were "bare and functional, the costumes expressive but severe" (Bartholomeusz 1978, 255). Bernice Kliman describes more striking garments: rich colors, rugged woolen costumes for the men, "body-encasing, silken costumes for the women (snake-green for Lady Macbeth), with breasts and navels shadowed with paint to suggest the naked body beneath" (Kliman 2004, 66).

Marsh's elaboration of her stage designs in the more lavish fictional form in *Light Thickens* similarly emphasize Lady Macbeth's sexuality: her "skin-tight gown of metallic material, slit up one side," perhaps a more glamorized detail carried over from the earlier productions, whose script sketches suggest a tight, figure-hugging gown. If Marsh is adapting her own production designs (on a more lavish scale), she may even have pre-empted the Stratford production in this respect — suggesting that space might be made for more settler-society productions in the performance archives.

Amidst such points of reference, Marsh's *Macbeth(s)* nevertheless show touches of a striking independence of thought. Tyrone Guthrie's Old Vic production in 1934, a "severely

rationalist" staging indebted both to A. C. Bradley and to Granville Barker's view of the play's textual corruption, omitted the opening scene with the witches entirely. Guthrie argued that "by making the three Weird Sisters open the play, one cannot avoid the implication that they are a governing influence on the tragedy" (Bartholomeusz 1978, 238). Marsh was incisively critical of the British productions she devoured during frequent visits. Her scrapbook from 1949-1950 records her critical observations on Anthony Quayle's production at the Stratford Memorial Theatre in the 1949 festival:

Duncan character not established. Note — why not bed him down and let the audience see this? . . . Apparitions good but their disappearance not quite right. [Godfrey] Tearle a dignified & orthodox performance. [Diana] Wynyard excellent in feeling but inaudible. (Marsh, Undated-C)

While a British reviewer for the *Tribune* noted the sinister poetry of the witches, the scene did not meet Marsh's own exacting standards. Byam Shaw's Stratford production with Olivier and Leigh had the "prettified" witches float down through the air at the beginning, in pink and grey costumes that faded into the background (Kliman 2004, 67-68). By contrast, Marsh's witches play a powerful role in opening the play and in providing its atmosphere, and are clearly an aspect of the play on which she focused much imaginative energy.

The conscious independence of her aesthetic can be traced in the surviving theatrical promptbooks of Marsh's productions with the Canterbury University Drama Society, which act as working scripts for the production of 1946, its tour to Auckland and Wellington in January 1947, and the production of 1962. The three books are preserved in the Manuscripts Collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library within the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington. The promptbooks are large, detailed, colorful books, in which the text is divided into a series of climaxes that are clearly marked out in bright red ink (and consistent between scripts). They demonstrate Marsh's typical style of pasting the typewritten text into a large book where there is room for her to add directions, musical and performer cues, and sketches — in both pencil and watercolor — on the facing pages. (She was also a talented painter, having studied at the Canterbury School of Art, and retained this practice throughout her life). Their density and detail reveal a meticulously schematized directorial control, particularly in the explicitly marked movements of the actors: "Ghost moves down and begins to weave towards P. Ghost deep, even pace" (Marsh 1962a, 31). Figure groupings are carefully plotted; gestures are tested in pencil and inserted into the interstices of the dialogue. Among the more striking of the illustrations are Marsh's portrayals of the witches, whom she intends to have a sinister power (Figure 1). The figures above show the

witches as Marsh sketched them in each incarnation. They appear frequently in the early pages of 1946 and 1947. The sketch of 1946 exhibits them in incomplete outline, as wraith-like forms that might at any moment melt off the page. Distinctively inhuman in aspect, semi-bald and peak-nosed, they are similarly reproduced in 1947, which frames them neatly in the set of staircase and gibbet. From this more scenic illustration we move to the sketch of 1962, when the witches appear in the dramatic moment of Macbeth's fevered imperative ("Stay you imperfect speakers"). A rare photograph in the Turnbull archives from the 1946 production at Canterbury University (Figure 2) suggests — despite the crudeness of the setting and costumes — how closely these designs were reproduced on the stage, in a tableau of Macbeth's first meeting with the witches. The most distinctive detail of this scene, however, is the gibbet behind the witches, complete with a dangling corpse on which they were feasting at curtain up. Preserved in each successive version of the play, this aspect of staging marks out Marsh's *Macbeth*: symbolic not only of the supernatural feeding on the human, but also perhaps of the degradation of humanity itself in the course of Macbeth's descent into bloody tyranny.

The scenery of Marsh's productions in both 1946 and 1962 is dominated by what *Light Thickens* will later describe as "a permanent central rough stone stairway curving up to Duncan's chamber" in the upper right corner (Marsh 2009b, 229). This basic geometry controls much of the actors' movements, as the staircase becomes barrier, gateway, and symbolic progression across the divide between good and evil (most especially in Macbeth's ponderous, pensive traipse towards the king's chamber). The stage design also sets up the witches' dramatic disappearance. The scripts themselves do not explicitly elaborate the techniques for the witches' exit at the end of the first scene. However, their suggestive call for "Blackout" and the testimony of one of the actresses of 1946 enables us to read backwards from *Light Thickens* to flesh out some of the performance details, suggesting a static freeze-frame created by the blackout of the witches' leap from the staircase at the back of the stage into a gap behind the scenery and onto cushioning below. "They'll leap up and we'll see them in mid-air. Blackout. They'll fall behind the high rostrum onto a pile of mattresses" (Marsh 2009b, 233). Actress Pamela Mann recalls her own vivid memories of the production, including "a long-forgotten leap into darkness, arms and talons outstretched, onto a waiting mattress" (Mann, Undated, 5). Theatrical spectacle of years before is reanimated by the novel.

Numerous key moments within the production scripts of 1946, 1947, and 1962 illustrate other conceptual similarities. At Macbeth and Banquo's first encounter with the witches on the heath in Act 1 Scene 3, in 1946, the witches huddle on the main staircase with the First Witch in the middle, an arrangement that Marsh favors in both scripts. The three grotesque bald heads eagerly convene

as the central First Witch points with a bony finger to the pilot's thumb on his palm. (The First Witch is played by a male actor in the 1946 production and in *Light Thickens*). According to the penciled stage direction, just before the entrance of the thanes the witches "descend" and "dance to position" at the foot of the staircase (Marsh 1946, 4). They move insistently "forward" through the scene in a maneuver that crowds and entraps their target, a premonition of the unrelenting restlessness that will accompany the play's progression. After addressing Banquo, they evidently return back up the staircase, while Macbeth approaches them from below to stay their departure.

In 1962, the witches' entrance is made differently, as they emerge severally from the two arches left and right and from above stairs to "smell the air. Huddled center, down facing footlights" (Marsh 1962a, 4). Macbeth is once again encircled (with Banquo giving ground). In this version a fuller sketch clearly shows the witches crouching back on their position mid-staircase, while Macbeth stands below with arm outstretched in imprecation. Finally, "witches turn their backs" (in preparation for that leap into darkness). Peregrine Jay's conviction in *Light Thickens* that the witches are aspects of Macbeth's mind, "conjured up by [his] secret thoughts" (Marsh 2009b, 233), finds its visual correlation in one of the sketches for the script of the play used on tour in 1947 in which Macbeth is pressed so closely up against the figures on the stairs that the lines dividing his face from theirs are indistinct (Figure 3).

Analysis of these designs suggests the distinctive contribution to the archive of Shakespearean performance that is offered by this strong-minded and creative New Zealand director. Though these several versions of the play suggest repetition and re-creation, they also indicate Marsh's fascination with remaking the play in successive iterations. That this desire should have been concentrated upon *Macbeth* is appropriate given the play's own verbal style, since it is distinguished by a "reiterative poetic texture" and "unremitting repetition" in its auditory effects. In Russ McDonald's stylistic analysis of Shakespeare's late tragic idiom, he highlights the "unprecedented concentration" of repeated words and sounds that resound throughout the play (McDonald 2006, 44; 47). The effect is produced by frequent and compressed uses of rhetorical techniques including epanalepsis (the echo at the end of a clause of the word with which it begins), which often creates a sense of muscular inexorability: "It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood" (*Macbeth* 3.4.121).<sup>4</sup> Language and idiom are also shown to be contagious; not only Lady Macbeth but Macbeth too picks up what L. C. Knights called "the sickening see-saw rhythm" of the witches' expressions (quoted in McDonald 2006, 30).

Shakespeare's powerfully condensed rhetoric infiltrates Marsh's own notes when she writes of the play: "The choice is the eternal choice between good and evil, the nightmare is the nightmare

of power-politics. *Macbeth* is the gangster-play to end all gangster-plays" (Marsh Undated-B). This amplificatory statement reproduces a kind of rhetorical claustrophobia just as Marsh's script designs encode it in the tightly entangled movement sequences of both productions. These features — reiterative language, rapid rhythm, claustrophobia — come to the fore in her final iteration of *Macbeth*, when *Light Thickens* turns theater into prose montage and dramatizes the powerful play's capacity to spill beyond the boundaries of the stage.

### *Light Thickens*: novel as performance

Marsh's final novel describes a wildly successful production of *Macbeth* at London's fictional riverside theater "The Dolphin," directed by the expatriate New Zealander Peregrine Jay (who, like Marsh herself, has already done two productions of the play). Jay's early professional adventures are detailed in *Death at the Dolphin* (1967). After an extensive build-up through the play's rehearsals, which feature superstition and romantic intrigue among the cast, the real performance is violently disrupted by the actual beheading of the Macbeth (Sir Dougal MacDougal) in the wings one night, and the carrying of his head, "streaming blood," onto the stage for the play's climax (Marsh 2009b, 350). With the writer's fascination trained on the idealized production and the mechanics of theatercraft, the single murder occurs nearly two-thirds of the way through the novel, whose primary purpose seems to be the architecture of a dramatically exciting and successful embodiment of *Macbeth*. The murder plot by comparison is rather slight and disappointing: Gaston Sears, who plays Seyton and McDougal's understudy, punishes the lead actor for mocking the ancient claymore with which the climactic fight is undertaken. In this final instance, then, of her internationally successful fiction, the potency of Shakespearean text overwhelms conventions of detective fiction much as the play within the novel threatens to spill beyond the boundaries of the theater.

Marsh's novel is a re-staging of *Macbeth* as murder mystery and as theatrical triumph in London. Lady Macbeth's gown is simply one of the details that is scaled up in a fantasy production that acts as Marsh's export of her theatrical visions to the metropolis and to her global readership at large. This aspect of the adaptation allows her to develop her production beyond the restrictions of working in a colonial city of small population with university students. However, if adaptation is partly "the compulsion to repeat" (Carroll 2009, 4), Marsh's novel is evidence that such a performance might harness the active pleasures of continuity as well as being necessarily transformative. *Light Thickens* is the product of many years' thinking about the possibility of more wholly conflating play and novel for what she calls in her autobiography a "final fling" (Marsh 2009a, 714). This phrase proved prophetic: the novel was submitted to her publishers shortly before

Marsh's death in February 1982. The manuscript was subsequently revised at Collins but proved commercially successful despite editors' misgivings (Lewis 1991, 256).

Even more so than others of Marsh's novels set in the world of the theater, the demands of the detective genre here appear subordinate to her interest in Shakespearean performance; it is easy to read this novel as a wish-fulfilment of the opportunity that Marsh never had to transport her own productions to the London stage. The author does, however, participate in the wider tradition in detective fiction of using Shakespeare as a critical part of her crime narratives. Susan Baker has studied both the extent and the manner in which Shakespeare is deployed in the genre:

[A]lthough classic detective stories repeatedly invoke Shakespeare, they engage only superficially the plays and poems for which he is supposedly famous. The idea of Shakespeare, however, Shakespeare as cultural token or totem, runs through classic detective stories with such frequency as to be all but a generic requisite. (Baker 1994, 164)

The relationship Baker describes here is a metonymic one, suggesting that in detective fiction specific plays and lines are invoked only superficially to represent the idea of "Shakespeare" himself. In this notion of a "cultural token," "Shakespeare" is merely the cipher for a specific nexus of privileged (and class-specific) values. Baker defines this peculiar economy of classic detective fiction as "Shakespeare equals good taste equals social superiority equals intellectual superiority equals moral superiority" (Baker 1995, 445). Conservatively, Shakespearean knowledge — and often integrity — tends to be aligned with characters of a more distinguished social class (of whom Marsh's detective Alleyn is one: he is a professional by inclination rather than necessity).

While Marsh's deployment of Shakespeare does at times exhibit these characteristics, she frequently presents a more nuanced and detailed engagement with particular plays themselves, and with performative utterance and timing as a mechanism to solve murder. Her final novel, however, broadly eschews the equation of Shakespeare knowledge with successful detection. Instead, it provides an entranced rendering of theatrical production which eclipses the detective plot proper and concentrates on the minutiae of the play's meanings.

If the murder plot itself is unremarkable in the context of detective writing, it is the formal devices and generic transposition offered by Marsh's novel that are much more striking and that offer a model for Shakespearean adaptation as a process both reiterative and metatextual in nature. By providing her last novel with a double frame — looking inward on the Dolphin's company, who look inward on the increasingly slippery world of the play — Marsh is finally able to place the Shakespearean text squarely at the center of her work *and* explore the matrix of relationships around its production. She creates thereby a model for the reader that invites them to examine her

techniques of appropriation, as well as of design and directorial method, at work. That Marsh's work discloses a vital *intersection* between theater and novel writing has become critically axiomatic, but there has been little sustained exploration to identify its precise formal relations (see Lewis 1991; Harding 2001). This analysis suggests that montage, sensory crossover, and lexical repetition all form a crucial part of Marsh's intersemiotic transfer of production to prose.

In a number of details the production of *Light Thickers* is evidently a reiteration of Marsh's previous versions. Lady Macbeth's "metallic" sleepwalking voice and her slinky "skin-tight gown of metallic material, slit up one side" (Marsh 2009b, 236) echo the "harsh metallic set" of the 1962 production, among other details that suggest Marsh is lovingly restaging and amplifying her own production designs (Lewis 1991, 177). Just as the stage productions bound the actors in heavy sheepskins tied with leather thongs (Lewis 1991, 177), this third instantiation of the play heavily emphasizes the materiality and bulk of medieval fabrics: "distinctive cloaks . . . particularly brilliant ones, blood-red with black and silver borders. For the rest, thronged trousers, fur jerkins, and sheepswool chaps. Massive jewellery. Great jewelled bosses, heavy necklets, and heavy bracelets" (Marsh 2009b, 236). Luxuriating in a historically hazy, clannish, Gothic Scotland, the fictional Dolphin production embellishes and extends the kind of adornments that Marsh's modest resources with the Canterbury Society could provide. The costuming is symptomatic of this scaled-up production: from hard-working amateur company to professional superstars, from a small Christchurch theater to the gaudy bankside confection (with a long, distinctive heritage) that director Peregrine Jay has resurrected. The production therefore distinctively reflects the duality of Marsh's own experience as a New Zealander deeply engaged with her national cultural scene as well as with the older and more established traditions of the "home" country of Britain.

The continuity in the positioning and aspects of the witches in the play has already been noted; in the novel, their appearance is explicitly hideous: "terrible faces" (Marsh 2009b, 235); "three disreputable old women [whose faces] are terrible and know everything. In the opening scene we see them, birdlike, as they are; almost ravens" (Marsh 2009b, 287). Their avian strangeness is prompted perhaps by the pose of outstretched wings in which they leap from the stage; they are birds of prey nibbling at human remains.

The role of Seyton also receives a particular amplification in the novel, not only because he is the murderer. In the 1962 production he is merged with the Third Murderer and with the Messenger to provide a more frequent and sinister presence throughout the play, sometimes silently hovering in the midst of scenes. This conceit is not a novel one, with a history in performance dating back to Davenant within whose adaptation he is "universal factotum and confidant" (Hunter 1967, 7). But it is taken to a different and much more menacing level in *Light Thickers*, where he is

the embodied "fate," "alter ego," "shadow," "a sort of judgement" (Marsh 2009b, 284); even "like death itself" (Marsh 2009b, 342). It is to him, and not to the First Murderer, that Macbeth remarks softly, "there's blood upon thy face." This remark is prophetic for events around the play, when Gaston becomes the murderer. An ominous shadow to the bloody king within the play's diegetic framework, he is also perpetrator of the enacted murder plot which "ghosts" the performance itself. The sensation of a "double life" adhering to the play is perpetuated by the detective Alleyn's re-enactment of the final scenes for his investigation. An echo of the "real" presentation which has the murderer playing his victim's role, its provision of exact timings and cast positions in service of the police enquiry denotes performance as a rigorously codified and repeatable event (like the meticulously choreographed climactic fight). This device is common in Marsh's theatrical fictions.

As homage to past performance, *Light Thickens* operates as a polyphonic space in which Shakespeare's text, Marsh's own production texts, and the loosened framework of detective conventions are layered to form a powerful mixture. In her recent theorizing of adaptation, Linda Hutcheon has emphasized the transactional quality that inheres in the enjoyment of such arrangement: "[p]art of this ongoing dialogue with the past, for that is what adaptation means for audiences, creates the doubled pleasure of the palimpsest: more than one text is experienced — and knowingly so" (Hutcheon 2006, 116). Hutcheon offers a salutary reminder that an act of recognition is crucial to the dialogic notion of palimpsest. Readers of *Light Thickens* — an international group — are explicitly signaled to read its relationship with the Shakespearean text; bound up in this pleasurable encounter is the possibility that specific identifications of the companion work might replicate the process of detection. (It is notable that knowledge of the Shakespearean text is frequently embedded within a detective clue-system: in this respect, readers of detective fiction and consumers of adaptations participate in a similar active engagement).

For another category of readership, those New Zealand audiences and actors with sufficient memory of the actual theatrical events that haunt the novel, their palimpsestic pleasure might be *trebled* by the triangulation of Shakespeare play/Marsh novel/Christchurch performance. This relationship, too, is explicitly if modestly displayed in the book's dedication to James Laurenson and Helen Holmes, the Macbeth and Lady Macbeth of 1962. Such pleasure is evinced by Pamela Mann's account (above) of playing a witch, a stimulation of memory which is complemented by the recollections of J.A. Pocock (who played the Doctor/Sergeant), who distinguishes *Light Thickens* from her other novels as "part of the enterprise we shared with her" as a local theatrical company (Pocock 1989, 2). *Light Thickens*, it is implied, successfully captures and replicates both the details and the ambience of a stage production from more than thirty years earlier. Marsh's specific act of adaptation here, which scripts the possibility of such a triangulated response, means that her

book should be recognized as belonging to a New Zealand performance history as well as bringing the latter into the wider archive of Anglophone performance. *Light Thickens* delivers a production from New Zealand (albeit disguised) to a global audience.

*Macbeth* seems a perfect choice for the Shakespearean detective novel; after all, one editor of the play has called it a species of "whodunit," in which the criminal's true propensities are gradually revealed to himself (Hunter 1967, 7). It is also an appropriate vehicle for the illustration of theater overrunning its (generic) boundaries, in its exploration of the self-destructive energies released by ambition. *Macbeth* is preoccupied with the slipperiness of signs, encoded through persistent motifs of disguise and deception. Macbeth's "false face must hide what the false heart doth know" (1.7.82), but he struggles hopelessly to contain the crime at the core of the play. In *Light Thickens*, the play's own ability to rupture into the "real" world in which it is performed, with threatening and even disastrous consequences, echoes the central dramatic ruptures of both moral and psychic integrity.

### Intermedial aesthetics

Within the verbal patterns of the novel (a "fugue" of repeated motifs, as Marsh described it), the title itself provides a pervasive lexical cluster. It is drawn from Macbeth's lines as he gives himself up to killing after killing, and to the oncoming dark:

Light thickens  
 And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood;  
 Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,  
 While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (3.2.50-53)

In a play that contains an unusually high proportion of couplets, the harmony here is a chilling one; Macbeth's alliterative triad (day/droop/drowse) recalls the incantatory idiom of the witches as he succumbs to moral chaos and the irresistible energy of evil, here "roused" to be unleashed in the violence onstage both in the play and in the novel.

Numerous instances of the polysemous verb "thicken" pervade the theater's atmosphere, expressing the gathering intensity and opacity of the play's emotional currents; they even find their way into descriptions of the world outside ("the traffic had not thickened" [Marsh 2009b, 291]). This lexical scheme partly articulates the play's bleeding outward into the frame of supposed "real" lives on its margins and outside the theater walls. "It's a volcano," claims Jay of the text in his jurisdiction, "Overflowing. Thickening" (Marsh 2009b, 272). This unbridled image of supra-human power is a more savage verbal counterpart to the shape of the theater rising above its surrounding urban plain, "conspicuous in its whiteness and, because of the squat mess of

little riverside buildings that surrounded it, appearing tall, even majestic" (Marsh 2009b, 237). Incongruous within the city space, "volcano" is a suggestive geological echo of Marsh's home country, and embodies an innate threat of mysterious and destructive violence waiting to be unleashed and to overrun its boundaries.

While such a rupture is most obviously enacted in the actual murder of an actor as he is "killed" in the play, its more microcosmic instances at the linguistic level — of the play breaking into its framing context — also subtly signify the challenges of containing the prior text. The "thickening" atmosphere describes miasmas of superstition and discomfort that gradually envelop different members of the cast. As the play's rehearsals strengthen to a full realization of Macbeth's destruction, and the mysteries build up among the cast, "[t]he play closes in on him. And on us." The reader stands in for the audience; "Everything thickens" (Marsh 2009b, 234). Marsh preserves the context of the title phrase in specific quotation. But she also extends and complicates its contexts in her appropriation: it becomes the sign of unease, of theatrical convention, of unexpected narrative complication (as in "the plot thickens") — and even of the very accretion of adaptations that have subsequently attended the play's afterlife. In the last sense, novels such as *Light Thickens* offer to extend what *Macbeth* is, making it simultaneously more substantial (in *Othello's* sense, to "thicken other proofs," at 3.3.431) and — paradoxically — more fluid.

Jay's feeling that "the days before the opening night seemed to hurry and to darken" (Marsh 2009b, 330) echoes the rhythm of the play itself as Macbeth speeds towards destruction. The pace of this is enacted in the text's more frequent pieces of montage, through the dress rehearsals and the run itself (just as Marsh's *Macbeth* of 1946 "unrolled with the continuous action of the cinema film"). It is in the often dreamlike and compelling quality of these passages that Marsh's prose is at its most expressive:

Exquisite lighting: a mellow and tranquil scene. Banquo's [sic] beautiful voice saying "*the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses.*" The sudden change when the doors rolled back and the piper skirled wildly and Lady Macbeth drew the King into the castle.

From now on it is night. (Marsh 2009b, 331)

This passage layers atmosphere, dialogue, and polysyndeton (conjunctions between each clause) to convey Duncan's inevitable movement towards his fate — a fate symbolically suggested in "night" and the abruptness of the sentence that follows. (Through a strange slip, Duncan's line here has been attributed to Banquo). As such scenes slip by in panoramic prose, the subtle shifts in tense — from present to past to present again — suggest the essentially cyclical nature of this production:

for its writer (and her real-life actors), it is happening now as it happened in the past (1946 and 1962), and as it will continue to resonate with the vitality and the gloss of the living theater. It is ephemeral and it is repetitive.

At the same time, this passage speaks of the author's fluid movement among genres of expression: as novelist, director and painter, her language betrays an instinctively multimedia approach (and even partakes of cinematic montage). This has already been noted in the elaborate combination of pencil, brush strokes, and typed text in the scripts. One of the distinguishing features of Marsh's detective novels, many of which feature a theater production or actors, is her technique for capturing the motion and atmosphere of theater in writing:

There is perhaps nothing that gives one so strong a sense of theatre from the inside as the sound of invisible players in action. The disembodied and remote voices, projected at an unseen mark, the uncanny quiet off-stage, the smells and the feeling that the walls and the dust listen, the sense of a simmering expectancy; all these together make a corporate life so that the theatre itself seems to breathe and pulse and give out a warmth. (Marsh 1964a, 72)

This extract from *Opening Night* (originally published 1951) draws together a range of sensory experiences — smell, warmth, and above all, sound — which are rendered verbally, with even a disingenuous admission that nothing "gives one so strong a sense" as the noise that by definition cannot be repeated in text.

In the novel *Final Curtain* (1947), written shortly after her first production of *Macbeth*, the play forms a vital context for the murder of an elderly Shakespearean actor posing for his portrait as the Scottish tyrant king. Detective Alleyn's wife Agatha Troy is the painter, herself haunted by the production she has recently designed and by the play's text that she *repeatedly* consumes; "Its threat of horror was now a factor in her approach to her work" (Marsh 1965, 6). Troy's lucidly described works, which Marsh readily acknowledges in reflection as a verbal cipher for her own "unattempted, non-existent" pictures (Marsh 1979, 142), bring the setting of *Macbeth* to life once more: "The rooky wood, a wet mass, rimmed with boldly stated strokes of her brush, struck sharply across a coldly luminous night sky. The monolithic forms in the middle distance were broadly set down as interlocking masses" (Marsh 1965, 86). The portrait's heavy outlines and "monolithic forms" adapt Troy's own set paintings, with clear echoes of Marsh's designs for the recent Christchurch play. Both playtext and performance become images suffused with interpretation, "ghosted" by their antecedent forms. Troy's painting, too, is a palimpsestic document. The author's unwillingness to settle for a singular expression of this remarkable passage in sketch, stage, or prose is symptomatic of an appropriative aesthetic that, "interlocking" different

genres, adopts continual shifts of medial perspective towards a relatively singular and stable vision of the play.

At one point in the novel, Troy's painting is vandalized and roughly daubed with aliens. This event is symbolic of the violence that will be performed not only on its subject (Sir Henry, the Macbeth, who is predictably dispatched), but possibly on the play itself. In this sense it anticipates the crude superstitious tricks with dummy heads that are played in *Light Thickens*. There is an appropriate "picture" of *Macbeth*, and there is its crude antithesis. The former remains consistent for Marsh in its outlines.

However, what appears at one level to be a kind of inert intermediality in *Light Thickens* — a transposition from stage to page thickened by a murder plot and detective process — nevertheless reveals more fully than any previous novels her fluid approach to Shakespeare as ungraspable in any single medium. Only Troy can produce a wholeness of representation that successfully elides all modes of expression. In the rather clumsy testimony of Sir Henry Ancred's son Cedric upon sight of the completed portrait: "I mean, it really *is* theater, and the Old Person and that devastating Bard all synthesized and made eloquent and everything" (Marsh 1965, 87). Such synthesis — such wholeness — can only be linguistically deferred.

While the focus here has been in detail on her aesthetic practices, Marsh's work is also of significance to the cultural politics of Shakespearean adaptation, and particularly to the growing understanding of adaptation strategies within settler societies.<sup>5</sup> Marsh is prominent among a range of artists in New Zealand who have used Shakespeare's works for a variety of purposes: as intertexts through which to negotiate their sense of settlement and connection to British/European culture; as a source of linguistic energy and fellowship; and more recently as a site of political critique. Marsh's affiliation with the doubled identity of New Zealand and Britain shared by her generation has produced readings such as Mark Houlihan's designation of her "late imperial groundbase" for Shakespearean interactions in New Zealand (Houlihan 2007, 170). Within wider criticism of Marsh, she has also been perceived as Anglo-centric, conservative and essentialist, even while celebrated for her undoubted vision and support for the arts. However, this first sustained analysis of Marsh's Shakespeare productions alongside her novelization of these same theatrical events suggests a more nuanced sensibility, disclosing her conscious relationship to the different dimensions of local and global Shakespeare, with the crossing of generic borders as a signal towards such double occupation.

This approach might also suggest a redefinition of the boundaries of "local" Shakespeare that have attracted critical attention principally to those works that emphasize radical difference.

Countering the critical embarrassment that often attends investigation of "late imperial" culture, colonial relationships between New Zealand and Britain are now being re-read by historians as comprising "cultural co-ownership" (Barnes 2012, 2). The identities formed under such conditions, both personal and artistic, are often active constructions rather than impositions. In this context, Marsh's multifocal engagement with Shakespeare is in part symptomatic of a settler culture that frequently experienced — through the complex dynamics of British affiliations — a sense of entitlement to or ownership of the Shakespearean canon.

In re-presenting the play, Marsh expects to "find" *Macbeth*, in the assumption that the Shakespearean play is a knowable, stable object, rather than what M. J. Kidnie calls "an unbounded diachronic series of events" (Kidnie 2005, 102). In fact, her own *oeuvre* precisely re-produces the play as such a diachronic series, while *Light Thickens* strongly dramatizes the possibilities and tendencies of the Shakespearean play to overspill the boundaries of the stage and of singular iteration. Articulating across her career the Shakespearean theater in prose, theater in painting, painting in prose, Marsh effects both intermedial repetition and adaptation.

These structural and linguistic transpositions demonstrate the importance of understanding her work through the generic interconnections that so frequently center on Shakespeare. At the same time, her London *Macbeth* is also a reiteration and restaging of *Macbeth* as it lived in the midcentury New Zealand theatrical scene. In her own distinctive ways, Marsh creates a kind of "settler Shakespeare," whose generic flexibility and multiple locations offer a point of negotiation for emerging identities in both the Anglo-world and post-colonial cultural landscapes.

### Notes

1. In the early part of the twentieth century, theater was principally produced in New Zealand by a number of professional touring companies from Australia and elsewhere, such as that of Allan Wilkie — and very enthusiastically received. Subsequently, local and regional amateur theatrical organisations were widespread and popular, alongside vigorous student/university societies, with a growing impetus through mid-century towards a national theatre. In the 1960s regional theaters such as Downstage in Wellington (1964) became established and the medium achieved what Peter Harcourt calls a "stable, professional outlook." See Peter Harcourt, *A Dramatic Appearance: New Zealand Theatre 1920-1970* (Wellington, NZ: Methuen, 1978).

2. In James's usefully succinct recent definition, the detective story

is differentiated both from mainstream fiction and from the generality of crime novels by a highly organized structure and recognized conventions. What we can expect is a central mysterious crime, usually murder; a closed circle of suspects each with motive, means

and opportunity for the crime; a detective, either amateur or professional, who comes in like an avenging deity to solve it; and, by the end of the book, a solution which the reader should be able to arrive at by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness. (James 2009, 15)

3. My archival sources are all drawn from the Alexander Turnbull collection of the National Library of New Zealand in Wellington. The Alexander Turnbull collection forms part of the National Library and contains both published and unpublished materials (including manuscripts, oral histories and photographs) as part of the national documentary heritage collections. The Turnbull includes a number of files on Marsh, including some of her prompt books, correspondence, scrapbooks with theater cuttings and draft versions of talks, as well as occasional loose manuscripts and notes with story ideas. References to manuscripts are preceded with "ATL" and then employ the library catalogue number. Not all sources have dates recorded.
4. All references to *Macbeth* are from the Cambridge University Press edition, edited by A. R. Braunmuller (1997).
5. New critical paradigms are emerging to understand settler societies as distinctive cultural formations. Daiva Stasiulis and Nira Yuval-Davis have defined settler societies as those "in which Europeans have settled, where their descendants have remained politically dominant over indigenous peoples, and where a heterogenous society has developed in class, ethnic and racial terms" (Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis 1995, 3).

## References

- Baker, Susan. 1994. "Comic Material: 'Shakespeare' in the Classic Detective Story." In *Acting Funny: Comic Theory and Practice in Shakespeare's Plays*. Edited by Frances Teague. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. 164-79.
- Baker, Susan. 1995. "Shakespearean Authority in the Classic Detective Story." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 46.5: 424-48.
- Barnes, Felicity. 2012. *New Zealand's London: A Colony and its Metropolis*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.
- Bartholomeusz, Dennis. 1978. *Macbeth and the Players*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Belich, James. 2009. *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Anglo-World, 1783-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Carroll, Rachel, ed. 2009. *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities*. London: Continuum.
- Edmond, Laurie. 1989. *Hot October*. Port Nicholson: Allen & Unwin.
- Harcourt, Peter. 1978. *A Dramatic Appearance: New Zealand Theatre, 1920-1970*. Wellington, NZ: Methuen.
- Harding, Bruce. 2001. "'The Twin Sisters in the Family of Fiction': Pirandellian Praxis and the Dramatic Narratives of Ngaio Marsh." *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 22.1: 137-60.
- Houlahan, Mark. 2007. "Think about Shakespeare: *King Lear* on Pacific Cliffs." *Shakespeare Survey* 55: 170-80.
- Hunter, G. K., ed. 1967. *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. London: Penguin.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge.
- James, P. D. 2009. *Talking About Detective Fiction*. Oxford: Bodleian Library.
- Kidnie, Margaret Jane. 2005. "Where is *Hamlet*? Text, Performance, and Adaptation." In *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance*. Edited by Barbara Hodgdon and W. B. Worthen. Oxford: Blackwell. 101-20.
- Kliman, Bernice W., ed. 2004. *Shakespeare in Performance: Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare. Second edition. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Lewis, Margaret B. 1991. *Ngaio Marsh: A Life*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Mann, Pamela. n .d. "Memories of the Little Theatre 1945-9." Alexander Turnbull Library Manuscripts Collection MS-8898-2/5, p. 5 [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1946. *Macbeth* — Producer's Script. Alexander Turnbull Library Manuscripts Collection fMS-159 [Wellington New Zealand].

- Marsh, Ngaio. 1947. *Macbeth* — Production Script. ATL fMS-162. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1962a. *Macbeth* — Producer's Notes. ATL MS 1397-4/18. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1962b. "The Three-Cornered World: The Actor" (Macmillan Brown Lecture). ATL MS-8898-2/5. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1964a. *Opening Night*. London: Collins.
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1964b. "The Quick Forge." *Landfall* 18.1: 32-40.
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1965. *Final Curtain*. London: Fontana.
- Marsh, Ngaio. 1979. "Portrait of Troy." In *Murderess Ink: The Better Half of the Mystery*. Edited by Dilys Winn. New York: Workman Publishing Group. 142-43.
- Marsh, Ngaio. 2009a. *Black Beech and Honeydew: An Autobiography*. London: HarperCollins.
- Marsh, Ngaio. 2009b. *Light Thickens*. London: HarperCollins.
- Marsh, Ngaio. Undated-A. "Macbeth notes." ATL MS 1397-3/3. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. Undated-B. "Notes on *Macbeth*." ATL MS-8898-2/5. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Marsh, Ngaio. Undated-C. Theatre scrapbook. ATL MS 1397-5/1. [Wellington New Zealand].
- McDonald, Russ. 2006. *Shakespeare's Late Style*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pocock, John. 1989. Letter to Margaret Lewis, 16 January. ATL MS-8898-1/05. [Wellington New Zealand].
- Shakespeare, William. 2003. *Othello*. Edited by Norman Sanders. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Shakespeare, William. 1997. *Macbeth*. Edited by A. R. Braunmuller. *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Stasiulis, Daiva, and Nira Yuval-Davis. 1995. "Beyond Dichotomies — Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Class in Settler Societies." In *Unsettling Settler Societies: Articulations of Gender, Race, Ethnicity, and Class*. Edited by Stasiulis and Yuval-Davis. London: Sage. 1-38.
- Sturm, Terry. 1991. "Popular Fiction." In *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*. Edited by Terry Sturm. Auckland: Oxford University Press. 491-541.
- Symons, Julian. 1974. *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: A History*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Thompson, Mervyn. 1980. *All My Lives*. London: Whitcoulls.