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Theatrical and Meta-theatrical Elements in Some Whodunits by Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh
Master’s Diploma Thesis

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2012
I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography.

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Author’s signature
I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Kyzlinková, for her kind help, advice and suggestions, and the time she devoted to my thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

The thesis explores the motif of “playing”, and one can find two kinds of playing here: the theatre and the game. These two are respectively connected to the topics of theatricality and meta-theatricality. Although, as demonstrated in the first chapter, there is a large number of authors using the theatre or meta-narrative in their novels, this thesis holds an opinion that none of them was or is so skillful at combining the topics together, and creating what can be referred to as “multiple staging”, as the two authors in question: Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh. Hence the reason for choosing these particular two for my analysis.

As mentioned above, the first chapter provides several significant writers who somehow contributed to the theatricality and/or meta-theatricality of a detective story. The chapter discusses exclusively British authors, however, its aim is not to make an overview or a timeline of a development of a whodunit. Therefore several less known authors are included because their narrative devices are similar to Christie’s and/or Marsh’s, and many famous or popular authors are omitted due to their lack of contribution to the topic. Theatricality and meta-theatricality do not only occur in stories throughout the whole history of detective fiction, but they are also mutually connected, and influence each other. At the end of the chapter a brief biographical background appears, attempting to explore Christie’s and Marsh’s interest in worlds of theatre and meta-narrative.

The second chapter concentrates on the theatre as such, trying to present wider knowledge of the world of drama. Marsh, and occasionally Christie, use various theatrical devices, and create the traditional types of theatre actors and actresses. The chapter explains their ideas and intentions, discusses several widely used theatrical expressions, and describes the functions and roles of theatre personnel. Since the
characters’ and inspectors’ (be it Alleyn or Miss Marple) knowledge of the theatre is always on a higher level than that of an average reader, it is useful to decipher the technical vocabulary and practices appearing in the novels explored.

The third chapter analyses theatrical elements in Marsh’s and Christie’s novels that do not necessarily take place in the building of a theatre. It first concentrates on the behaviour of actors both on and off-stage, their theatricality, pretence, and their relationships towards each other and towards strangers (police officers in particular). It also addresses the issue of how their usual attitudes (which might, however, seem rather odd to an unexperienced spectator) affect the crime, the investigation, and the whole plot of a detective story. The remaining part manifests the fact that these authors’ texts examined display many theatrical elements that have nothing to do with theatre at all.

The fourth chapter deals with what this thesis calls a “meta-whodunit”: a detective story with meta-narrative elements. Similarly to a play-within-a-play, this is a whodunit-within-a-whodunit. It includes several kinds of detective meta-narratives: the basic meta-narrativity are passages where different works of literature (in the case of detective stories very often also fictional ones) are quoted or mentioned; general statements of the kind “In detective stories they usually do it like this.”; situations based on various scenes from prose or drama (murders sometime resemble deaths in tragedies or crimes in other whodunits); and, last but not least, the murder games that are, even nowadays, still popular.

One of the main goals of this thesis is to discuss the following questions: What opportunities do the theatrical and meta-narrative elements give to all the characters in the novel? What impact does the theatricality have on the readers, their perception of the plot and their guesswork? Although very frequently underestimated as a narrative, a Golden Age whodunit is first and foremost a battle of wits to which the theatricality and meta-theatricality considerably contribute.
1 WHODUNITS IN RETROSPECTIVE

The theatricality of whodunits begins along with the very beginning of detective fiction. The 19th and early 20th-century mystery writers laid on the narrative grounds for the next generations of authors. The influence of one generation on another is at some places clearly visible, as far as both the plots and characters, and the structure and the choice of words are concerned. Therefore, the theatricality and meta-theatricality permeates through the whole history of detective fiction, and this chapter serves as a proof of this fact.

1.1 Influences of the “Classics”

Since Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) is usually considered as the founder of a British whodunit, it would be wise to open this chapter with his contributions to the theatricality of a detective story, and their connection to Christie and Marsh. Collins’s usage of theatrical elements is not random. Apart from being a novelist, he also was a more or less unsuccessful playwright (altogether he wrote seventeen plays), and was a member of Charles Dickens's amateur company. He was interested in the stage life but also, for example, in ways the plays were constructed, and tried to adopt this scheme in his novels.

The best example of the theatricality in Collins’s crime stories can be found in Mr Wray's Cash Box: Or the Mask and the Mystery (1851). It is one of the first examples, if not the very first, of an actor playing a main part in what could be considered detective fiction. Here Collins started the whole tradition of the backstage information, stage jargon, or strange behaviour of actors, and their relationships, so largely used later, mostly by Edgar Wallace and Ngaio Marsh. Reuben Wray, the main
character, is a former actor who played smaller parts in various theatres. Collins devotes almost two whole chapters to the company in the Drury Lane Theatre, especially to the strange friendship between Mr Wray and the main star of the company – John Phillip Kemble – the character based on a real actor at the turn of the eighteenth century. Collins does not fail to inform his reader about this fact in the footnotes. The reader learns throughout the text about the admiration the less important actors have for the leading ones (a fact pointed out by Marsh in connection to young aspiring actresses or dressers), the costumes used, the new trends in acting, etc. He also uses another of the devices later developed by Marsh and others: calling some of the characters not by their names but by their roles in some plays. Wray’s wife is, then, the Columbine, and one of Wray’s friends, Martin Blunt, is called Julius Caesar; simply because the former is not important enough to have a name, and he utterly refuses to call the latter “Blunt”. The reader can find this device, for example, in Marsh’s *Light Thickens* where the character actors (Banquo, Lennox) or minor roles (the witches) are called, mostly by the director’s wife, after the parts they play.

As many authors before and after him, Collins also puts Shakespeare in his novel. Shakespeare (or at least his face) here plays one of the main roles. Wray possesses only one book, and that is the complete works of Shakespeare which he always read between acts when he was playing in some of Shakespeare’s plays at Drury Lane. Therefore, he knows the famous Elizabethan author by heart. That is why he uses some Shakespearean expressions or gestures in almost every other sentence he utters (but he had also learned Mr Kemble by heart, and unconsciously imitates him in various situations). His passion for Shakespeare even goes so far that he breaks in Shakespeare’s tomb in Stratford and steals his mask. It is self-evident that this very mask is the cause of all the trouble, and is the centre of the criminal plot. Similarly, Shakespeare and his
lines play a vital (or, in fact, even mortal) role in several of Marsh’s novels – *Light Thickens* in particular – and are being quoted by almost all her theatre personnel.

Collins’s novels are very often written in a drama-like style. It is because he believed “that the Novel and the Play are twin-sisters in the family of Fiction; that the one is a drama narrated, as the other is a drama acted” (*Basil ii*). The best example of this is *The Haunted Hotel* (1878). The last several chapters of this novel are narrated by the Countess Narrona, one of the main female characters, who writes it as a play, and, therefore, introduces the characters as dramatis personae, and opens every act with an introduction to the setting of the scene. Also some other of his novels, *The Woman in White* above all, are constructed rather non-prosaically – they are, in fact, written dialogues with no general or main narrator involved (only several introductory pieces of information at the beginning or the end of each chapter). These are, according to Booth, what might be called “dramatic novels”: “Without formulating a credo these writers distilled techniques of the stage in the alembic of narrative imagination and spoke of the end-product as ‘dramatic novels’. ” (135) The reader can find this kind of structure in all whodunits by Christie and Marsh explored here. The characters (usually the sleuths) close each chapter, or, often even paragraphs, with passionate exclamations, exit replicas, or important realizations. The texts are sometimes divided similarly as a play, into acts and/or scenes (*Three Act Tragedy*), and the chapters are often introduced rather theatrically (“Exit Liversige. Enter Bob Parsons (whistling)” – the title of chapter 20, *Vintage Murder*).

Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) introduced another theatrical element into detective fiction: the use of disguise. Probably the best examples are “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), and “The Adventure of the Empty House” (1903). In both cases Holmes is the disguised one, and employs a certain kind of theatricality to confuse both
other characters (Watson above all) and the reader. In the former, Holmes not only uses a disguise to get into a house of a famous opera singer Irene Adler, but he, in fact, engages the whole street into his plan. He chooses several unemployed people to play ordinary passerbys, and what follows, looks like a scene from some Goldonian comedy. Holmes needs a turmoil in order to sneak into Adler’s living room and steal a letter. The people in the street therefore start acting as if on the stage: there is some fight, the men are shouting, the women are panicking – the whole scene is very hysterical, very theatrical.

In the latter, Holmes himself behaves rather theatrically. He, again, uses a disguise (as is already his tradition); this time he dresses himself as an old book collector. The interesting point of the story is the way he reveals his identity. He is in a room with Watson, who is not in the least aware of the fact that the old man is Holmes, and the detective waits for him to look the other way, so that he could drop his costume. This is very theatrical. One can almost see the audience breathing in from surprise when they realise, that it is Holmes, and Dr. Watson looking at the audience rather confused about their strange reaction, before he turns back. It is the kind of scene, so typical of the drama, where the reader/audience finds out about some fact before the characters do.

It might be interesting to note here that while Doyle usually masks his great detective, not the murderer, Christie, for example, disguises her culprits more frequently (Lord Edgware Dies, Dead Man’s Folly), and there is only one case in which the detective uses a costume – Curtain. However, since Poirot himself commits the crime in this novel, it is again a murderer’s disguise. Marsh’s and Christie’s sleuths do not need disguises to learn important pieces of information – they use masks of behaviour, pretending to be more witless than they truly are, and with this often place themselves into the indirect roles of actors. The purpose of their acting is not, however, to surprise their Watsons, but to deceive their suspects.
Doyle’s contemporary, Fergus Hume (1859-1932), fits into the topic of theatricality very well. In his endeavour to become a famous dramatist he wrote a detective novel *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* in order to become well-known and get his plays published and performed more easily. However, in the end he found himself being much more an author of whodunits than a playwright. In fact, the only truly successful play he ever wrote, that was highly performed on stages in London and Melbourne, was his dramatization of the *Hansom Cab*. Nevertheless, he spent a great deal of time in theatres, and he put his experience into some of his novels.

*Madame Midas* (1888) and its sequel *Miss Mephistopheles* (1890) are both set in the theatrical world. Particularly the former contains almost all the theatrical elements that this thesis analyses. One of the main male characters of the story is Theodore Wopples, an actor, a head of an Australian provincial company, a translator and a playwright. He is exactly the type of character that Ngaio Marsh ridicules in her novels. He behaves like an actor even outside the theatre: he has occasional fits of laugh at his own jokes, he speaks in one-word sentences with the exclamation mark, he keeps referring to something or someone as being Shakespearean or Johnsonian, etc. He writes his own versions of some popular plays and he keeps thinking about them all the time – that is why he is even able to interrupt a conversation with remarks like: “This would be a very good comedy line.”, or “I should use it in the second act!” (Hume 79). He is, in fact, a combination of Christie’s mystery writer Ariadne Oliver, and Marsh’s acting doorkeeper from *Vintage Murder*.

The second novel loosely continues where the first one stopped. In both the books there is a character of Kitty, a young and promising actress. It is interesting how often in detective fiction there is a young actress who is eager to get on the stage. No theatrical novel by Ngaio Marsh can do without a similar character. She is usually not the murderess because she is too innocent for that, and, therefore, serves mostly as the
centre of a romantic plot line. Hume‘s Kitty Marchurst, an eighteen-year-old naive girl, standing for the first time on the stage of a small theatre in Melbourne, called The Bon-Bon, performing in Miss Mephistopheles, is so similar to the character of Martyn in the Opening Night that one might only wonder whether she was an inspiration for Marsh or whether it is a pure coincidence. It is sometimes very difficult to trace the origins of Marsh’s and Christie’s characters.

If there is any novel by Hume that shows theatrical behaviour of actors and actresses better that any other, it is The Fever of Life (1892). There are performers that are by far the worst in their profession in using dramatic expressions - the opera singers. The main female character is Mrs. Belswin who is constantly being pursued by her former lover, Stephano Ferrari. They are both opera singers, and what is worse, Stephano is, as his name suggests, an Italian. This combination makes him the most theatrical, and, consequently, one of the most ridiculous characters in the history of detective fiction. Hume here also plays with another topic, often used by both Christie and Marsh: jealousy and adultery. It does not matter whether it is Mr. Belswin, Lord Edgware (Lord Edgware Dies by Christie), or sir Henry Ancred (The Final Curtain by Marsh) – the fear of being cheated on by a young actress they married is always present, as one cannot believe her if she is an actress.

1.2 The Golden Age

The time period between the two World Wars is usually considered as the Golden Age of detective fiction. One of the first authors of this period, and also one with, possibly, the largest number of “theatrical” whodunits in the whole history of criminal fiction, is Edgar Wallace (1875-1932). He quantitatively defeats even Marsh, the queen of the criminal theatre.
While reading Ngaio Marsh, one experiences a constant *déjà vu*, because, in many aspects, her novels are very similar to Wallace’s. A large number of his stories repeatedly take place in the Orpheum Theatre (Marsh also has her “very own” theatres: the Vulcan and the Dolphin). But he often sets his criminal plots to different theatres, for example, the Macready Theatre, the Erving Theatre, the Gordon Theatre, or the Sheridan Theatre. Similarly to Marsh, most of the theatres are nonexistent. There also is a young and eager actress trying to get on some important stage (Mary Lane in *The Clue of the Silver Key*, 1930), an old actress who has decided to retire (Ursula Ardfern in the *The Clue of the New Pin*, 1923), the theatrical friends whom the reader cannot trust because they are actresses whose histrionic behaviour is apparent even outside the theatre, and who also portray a nice example of the strange relationships between the actors (Ella and Paula in *The Feathered Serpent*, 1927). The reader also cannot fail to notice the character of a dresser and his constant respect and admiration for the leading lady (*New Pin*), or the seemingly minor role of a costumer and a curtain painter (*The Angel of Terror*, 1922). As demonstrated later in this paper, all of these can be found in various Marsh’s novels.

What makes Wallace’s stories not only theatrical but also meta-theatrical, are the characters of playwrights. In the *Dark Eyes of London* (1924) one can find a character of John Dearborn who is, in fact, more or less introduced into the story by means of a playbill on a wall. The reader can find another similarity to Marsh here, since she also opens one of her novels, Killer Dolphin, with a playbill on the wall of an old theatre. In *Admirable Carfew* (1914), apart from introducing another playwright, Theo Grudge, Wallace also portrays a character of a typical producer, Carfew. Similarly to Marsh’s producers, managers and stage directors, Wallace’s Carfew boasts of everything he does – he is a true impresario. As it will be shown, for example, on Marsh’s *Vintage Murder*, the impresario’s unpopular manners often lead to a murder.
Wallace’s descriptions of theatres and impresarios are taken from his own life experience. He wrote twenty-four plays, and most of them were even more successful than his novels. That is probably why he considered himself more a playwright than a story-teller, even if he wrote 175 novels. In this he can be compared to Marsh for whom the theatre and directing was more important than writing. He also realised that even in his prose he, and not only he but most detective fiction authors, use theatrical elements. In *The Duke in the Suburbs* he states that most of the authors follow “the rules of the theatre, which demand that no character shall leave the stage without an affective line to take them off, such as ‘We meet tomorrow!’ or ‘Look to it, Sir George – look to it!’” (161). It is very possible, that, although Wilkie Collins had developed this idea several decades before Wallace, Christie and Marsh were in structuring their novels more influenced by Wallace’s theatrical rules. It is one of Christie’s ways of ridiculing Poirot, to let him conclude each chapter, and the last chapter in particular, with various remarks and realizations such as “Poirot never give up, madame!” or “It might have been worse – they might have killed ME!” (both *Three Act Tragedy*). Marsh’s Alleyn keeps a certain amount of dignity, and therefore these exclamations are usually made by his fellow investigator Inspector Fox. However, his exclamations are mostly in the middle of each chapter – the last lines are always being said by Alleyn, although, his remarks are never dramatic in nature.

Detective fiction might very possibly be considered as drama, it is hard to distinguish, however, whether the whodunits belong rather to the category of tragedies or comedies. On one hand, both Marsh and Christie compare their plots to great Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies (*Macbeth, Othello, The Duchess of Malfi*), on the other, they often portray their characters (and the sleuths in particular) rather as Commedia dell’Arte types. Grella also agrees with the theatricality of detective fiction. According to him: “Most of the works display not only the usual conditioning exerted
by the comedy of manners on the whodunit, but also normal comedy of manners masquerading as the detective novel.” (46) Bearing this in mind, it would be probably wise to call a Golden Age whodunit a tragicomedy.

Apart from Christie and Marsh, another two “formidable women”, as P.D. James constantly calls them in her study *Talking About Detective Fiction*, belong to the Golden Age of detective fiction: Dorothy L. Sayers and Margery Allingham. One of the biggest merits of the female authors of the Golden Age is their ability to ridicule themselves and their writing. While Christie uses the character of Ariadne Oliver for these purposes, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893-1957) does it by means of Harriet Vane.

Miss Vane appears in four novels: *Strong Poison* (1930), *Have His Carcase* (1932), *Gaudy Night* (1935), *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1937); and Sayers put a great wit in the character. The reader is constantly amused by Sayers’s observations about detective fiction. Harriet Vane, being an author of whodunits, gains her popularity when she is accused of murder. The fact that she is a writer actually “saves her skin” at the court: she bought some poison several times, but not in order to kill her fiancé but to find out how easy it is to buy it – she used the poison in her novel and wanted to have accurate information. This is similar to Mrs. Oliver who very often wants to experience what she writes about, for example in *Third Girl* where she decides to chase a suspect.

Harriet also attempts to investigate the crime. In *Gaudy Night* she is asked to do so by the dean and other teachers of the college; they expect her to be a specialist. She has to remind them that it is not so easy in real life as it is in her novels. It is her way of “buck-passing”, very often also used by Marsh’s main sleuth, Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard, Roderick Alleyn who disproves of relying on fiction for information. In *Have His Carcase* Harriet tries to investigate the murder by herself voluntarily, and her thoughts of what Robert Templeton, the sleuth and main character of her novels, would
do first and what next, or what he would think and deduct from the clues, create one of the most entertaining and humorous scenes in the history of detective fiction.

What Sayers does not fail to point out is the fact that Harriet is not able to successfully investigate the crime by herself. She needs an experienced man, usually Peter, but occasionally some other inspector, to help her, to put his wisdom into the case. As one of Sayers’s characters note in *Strong Poison*: “I wonder whether, if she didn’t do it, she has spotted the murderer herself? I don’t suppose detective writers detect much in real life, do they, except Edgar Wallace of course, who always seems to be everywhere and dear Conan Doyle…” (32). Christie’s Ariadne Oliver tries to deny this fact but is not very successful either. She constantly reminds Poirot of her “feminine intuition”, but, as demonstrated later, the Belgian detective is never too convinced about her abilities. Since Mrs. Oliver first appeared in 1936 – six years after Harriet Vane – one might only wonder whether Christie took her inspiration for her meta-narrative character only in her life experience, or also elsewhere.

Margery Allingham (1904-1966) concentrates on both theatrical and meta-theatrical motifs in her novels very often. Probably the best example for the purposes of this thesis is *The Fashion in Shrouds* (1938) which deals with the topic of an actress who is getting old and therefore uncertain about herself and her acting career. Her attempts to remain a leading lady in the theatre, despite her age, make her sometimes look slightly ridiculous. She keeps referring to her best role in a play called *The Little Sacrifice*, and she, as these old actresses usually do, lives more in the past than in the present. Similar theatrical elements can be found in Christie and, particularly, Marsh, whose Miss Bellamy, the main heroine of *False Scent*, might have been inspired by Allingam, since Marsh’s novel was written more than twenty years later.
1.3 Peers and Successors

There is one author whose passion for Shakespeare equals Marsh’s and whose constructions of his Shakespearean whodunits in certain ways resemble Marsh very much: Michael Innes (1906-1994). Although being considered a more recent writer than the “four formidable women”, some of his whodunits could belong to the Golden Age, both due to their structure and date of publication.

One of his famous novels, *Hamlet, Revenge!* (1937), is very similar to Marsh’s last book, *Light Thickens*. The first third of the story is full of rehearsals of *Hamlet*, and all the devices of Jacobean stage are described here: the role of a forestage and a balcony, where the lights should be, how many props are too many, what the costumes should look like, what gestures are appropriate for an amateur company, etc. The experienced reader may already expect the following scenario where the crime is committed in front of the audience, in the middle of a murdering scene (the very one with Polonius behind the curtain). When Innes put some uninvited spectators, literary scholars, into the story, he probably did not expect that his own novel would become a scholarly study of a very important Shakespearean scholar, Walter Wilson Greg, as Susan Baker notes in her article (424).

Innes’s passion for Shakespeare can also be seen in “Tragedy of a Handkerchief” (published in a collection of stories *Appleby Talking*), which is also very Marsh-like. Again, the murder happens right on the stage, in front of the audience, even in front of detective Appleby (here the similarity to Marsh and her Alleyn who, throughout his career, happens to be present at three murders during the performances) – when Othello decides to strangle Desdemona, he realizes that she is already dead. In a short space of a several-paged story, Innes is able to quote Shakespeare, to analyze the acting, to comment on the relationships backstage, to notice the strange use of some props, and, of
course, to solve the murder. And, which is another typical feature, his characters do not have names – they are called by their roles in *Othello*.

The authors who started composing their criminal puzzles in the middle of the 20th century were also trying to find new approaches to constructing whodunits. No one can wonder, then, that their novels tend to be more psychological and/or more thrilling, and that the theatrical and meta-theatrical elements remain in the backdrop. However, from time to time, these authors pull some of them into the limelight. While the well-known authors, such as P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, or Reginald Hill, are less classic and more innovative, and therefore use theatricality and meta-narrative only marginally, with almost no similarities to any of the authors or novels above, their contemporary, Caroline Graham (born 1931), recently very popular in Britain, continues in the “theatrical” tradition of Marsh and Innes, with her novel *Death of a Hollow Man* (1989).

In this novel the leading star, playing the character of Amadeus, kills himself accidentally in front of the audience. Graham in this book deals with most of the theatrical elements already mentioned or further developed later. Again, the murder happens while the inspector (in this case Tom Barnaby) is sitting in the auditorium; he then has to cope with the dramatic behaviour of the actors (which is usually the worse, the more amateur the company is), the pretence and theatre disguises, the props in wrong places, the lights, the backstage technicians, and so on. To the theatricality of her stories also contributes the fact that Barnaby’s daughter is an aspiring young actress.

1.4 Inspiration Taken from Experience

Although Marsh and Christie were possibly influenced by the older generation of mystery writers, employing some of the traditional devices in the novels, their characters, plots and settings are very often clearly based on their own life experience.
Before this paper proceeds any further, it would be wise to point out their encounters with the theatrical world, the world of detective fiction, and certain relevant moments of their lives.

The reason for this paper to call Ngaio Marsh “the queen of criminal theatre” is based on the fact that she spent most of her life both on and off-stage, and included her theatrical experience in nine of her 32 novels. In the early 1920s she joined the Alan Wilkie Shakespeare Company and later the Rosemary Rees Comedy Company, and worked as an actress for several years, taking part in various tours around New Zealand. In the 1940s she returned back to theatre, this time as a director. She was mostly interested in productions of Shakespeare, hence novels such as *Light Thickens*, or *The Final Curtain* that revolve around *Macbeth*. Her home theatre was The Little Theatre, connected to the Canterbury University College Drama Society, but she toured with her plays across the whole country. She even lived to see her very own theatre, the Ngaio Marsh Theatre, which was opened in 1967 with her production of *Twelfth Night*. According to the critics, her directing and producing was very similar to what happened on stages in London, although she spent most of the time in New Zealand. (*Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*) That is probably why all her theatrical novels are set either in London or there is a London company travelling to New Zealand. When one learns about her theatrical life, which was for her undoubtedly more important than writing, it is no wonder that she had a vast knowledge about theatre, every angle and every corner of it.

Agatha Christie’s experience with the theatre is not so deep, and, therefore, the topics of the stage and acting fill only a small portion of her novels. However, she was not entirely unacquainted with it. During the World War II she visited an actor, Francis Sullivan, several times, and later claimed: “I always found it restful to stay with actors, because to them, acting and the theatrical world were the real world, any other world
was not. [...] So their entire talk was of theatrical people, theatrical things, what was going on in the theatrical world, who was going into E.N.S.A.—it was wonderfully refreshing.” (Autobiography 477) She was then able to describe an actor’s nature, for example in Lord Edgware Dies or Three Act Tragedy, very similarly to Marsh. In her autobiography she also names reasons for writing detective plays: “I think what started me off was annoyance over people adapting my books for the stage in a way I disliked. [...] It suddenly occurred to me that if I didn’t like the way other people had adapted my books, I should have a shot at adapting them myself.” (Autobiography 460) She uses this experience for “meta-theatrical” purposes in Mrs. McGinty’s Dead in which her fictional writer Ariadne Oliver is highly unsatisfied with what a playwright and a stage director Robin Upward is aiming to do with her famous whodunit. She put, in fact, her whole personality into the character of Mrs. Oliver: from her disgust with her main sleuth and her realization about the absurdity of his age (“Now I saw what a terrible mistake I had made in starting with Hercule Poirot so old—I ought to have abandoned him after the first three or four books, and begun again with someone much younger.” – Autobiography 275), to her phobias of public speeches. “I cannot make speeches, I never make speeches, and I won’t make speeches, and it is a very good thing that I don’t make speeches because I should be so bad at them.” (Autobiography 505-506) Some of these are developed later in this paper. From her autobiography, apart from the resemblances with Ariadne Oliver, one can also conclude that Christie was an enthusiastic theatre spectator and a keen reader of drama, and, therefore, the reasons for not making the theatre a central theme of any of her novels must be searched for elsewhere than in her lack of knowledge in this field. It was probably not as deeply rooted in her nature as the English countryside, the small villages and large mansions, to which she devoted most of her plots.
2 THEATRE

This chapter describes the technical issues of the theatre – the parts which the buildings usually consist of, the technical devices that are supposed to make the performance easier (however, as one might notice, in detective fiction they usually do quite the opposite), and the function of props and sets – as well as the usual list of personnel, both cast and staff. Most parts of this chapter concentrate on Marsh who, being “the queen of criminal theatre”, devoted almost one half of her novels to the theme of theatre and actors.

2.1 On Both Sides of the Curtain

Every theatre is divided into four main parts: the foyer, the auditorium, the stage and the backstage, and Marsh makes sure that she does not leave any of these out when a murder is committed. The crime may happen in the darkness of the backseats, in the limelight, as well as in the locked dressing room.

What opportunities for a murder, then, does the auditorium offer? Since it is sunken in dark, with people usually paying all their attention to the stage and not to their neighbours, the crime, if it is quiet enough, can be carried out secretly and anonymously. It is interesting that nothing like that can be found in any of Marsh’s novels. The reader would undoubtedly be amused by a scene where Alleyn, after the lights go on again, would realize with horror that the next seat is filled with blood. A balcony, as Marsh demonstrates in *Killer Dolphin*, seems to be more suitable for a murder. A young boy is found in one of the seats of a completely deserted auditorium in a very awkward position. Alleyn soon realizes that he was thrown down from the balcony. However, as one can learn from this novel, the balcony is not the best choice for a murder since it is
not high enough (twenty feet only in the case of the Dolphin Theatre), and the victim might recover, eventually, to identify the perpetrator.

The crime seems to be much “safer” when committed right on the stage. Every stage consists of the forestage (the place before the curtain), the proper stage, the fly loft above the stage, and the trap room under the stage. Another interesting fact is that Marsh does not use the trap (the opening in the stage floor used for special effects) to hide a corpse. Probably because the reader would find it too easy a solution. Even if Peregrine Jay, the producer and director that reappeares in several of Marsh’s novels, almost becomes “a body in a trap” in the Dolphin Theatre, it is caused more by his own clumsiness than by the intention of anyone else.

Marsh undoubtedly finds the fly loft much more useful for committing a murder. The reason is that only a limited number of people ever go there, and also that people usually do not look up. Therefore, it is a perfect place for throwing deadly objects down, or for hiding a body. Everyone who works there must be very careful with their tools when installing the sets or props. As Alleyn says in *Vintage Murder*: “I imagine they take a lot of trouble when men are working aloft. I remember the stage-manager told me the hands always have their tools tied to their wrists, in case of accidents.” (110) However, one of the roles of detective fiction is to refute the safety, and, therefore, the reader should not be surprised by occasional accidents. In *Enter the Murderer* the property master throws a glass object down from the loft, only several inches from Nigel Bathgate’s head. But he cannot fool Alleyn: “So you cheerfully dropped half a ton of candelabrum on the stage, first warning us of its arrival, as apparently you weren't keen on staging another murder to-night.” (57) It is as if Marsh examined the perception of not only the characters, but also the reader, and trained the reader’s reaction with every new novel. Therefore, in *Vintage Murder* for example, the reader immediately expects
the bottle of champagne, premeditatedly hanging on the strings from the loft, to serve as a weapon rather than a birthday present.

As suggested above, the loft might be an ideal place for hiding a body. Alleyn provides the reader and his colleagues with an option of how it could be done:

Suppose I’d killed a man and you knew it. I get here first. I go up there to the platform, put a noose in that rope, and make the other end fast. Then I climb down again. You come in, very nervous. I say: 'Come on up this ladder. Quick.' I go up first, past the lower landing. He follows. I get to the top landing and wait with the noose in my hands. As his head comes up, I drop it over. One fierce tug. He loosens his hands and claws his neck. Then a heavy thrust and…That's how it worked. (EM 154-155)

It is no wonder then that Alleyn’s first steps in *Vintage Murder* lead directly to the loft. He is already well acquainted with the ropes, the footprints on the dusty floor, the slipperiness of the iron ladder, or the squeaky boards, from his previous cases.

Nevertheless, no matter how convenient for homicide the stage “above” is, the most important part of the theatre is the backstage (or off-stage) where most of the crimes, and also most of the plot, happen. There are, in particular, the dressing rooms, the manager’s office, and the passage that connects all these rooms. In the middle or at the end of the passage is usually the back door, specially meant for the actors and the rest of the staff, so that they would not have to pass the spectators in their entrances and exits. In Marsh’s novels there are two of these doors, and the smaller one plays an important role in the escape route of the criminal (*Vintage Murder*) and, since the theatres in her novels are frequently hidden in the streets of London, the door leads to a backyard, or a dark lane. What Marsh wants to point out, is the large number of various
doors and rooms that can be found only in a theatre, and that provide the reader and the sleuth with various possible options of a getaway. As one of the police officers in *Vintage Murder* counts:

“Stage-door. Footlights. Dressing-room passage here. Prompt-side ladder to the grid, about here. Back-stage one here. There’s a back door there, you see. […] Now the front of the house. Stalls. Circle. No pass-doors through the proscenium. Here’s this office. Door into box-office. Door to yard. The bicycle shed isn’t in their plan, but it begins just beyond this office.” (136)

Marsh is well aware of the fact that this could easily confuse everyone but Alleyn, who is acquainted with the theatre backstage and can therefore follow and eventually outwit the murderer. That is why she provides the reader with a plan of the building at the beginning of the book, so that anyone can consult it when needed, and see it visually.

The manager’s office usually serves two purposes: Alleyn and Fox make a temporary interrogation room of it, inviting all the actors and other employees of the theatre one by one to deal with their confessions, and, much more interestingly, it plays the main role in “the mystery of the closed/opened door”. Marsh’s manager’s offices have similar functions as Lord This-or-that’s study in Christie’s novels since most of the deals are made, and most of the secrets are revealed there. The manager’s office door is always locked during the performance, the rehearsals, or when the theatre is empty, and therefore it is highly suspicious whenever someone finds it open. As, for example, Dr Te Pokiha does in *Vintage Murder* when he returns to the office to grab his coat. The experienced reader should already know that every theatre manager always locks the door, if only for several minutes. He has important documents and sometimes
also the safe in the room. The reader should realize, as Alleyn does, that something is wrong if the door is open with nobody inside.

And last but not least, there are the dressing rooms. Every dressing room is a different small world, as the actors leave something of them behind. Most of the emotions and most of the conversations between the actors happen in dressing rooms. Therefore, where else can a corpse of an irritating actor be found than in his own dressing room? Nevertheless, in order to commit a perfect crime, the murderer has to bear in mind that in a dressing room the actor/actress is always in a certain phase of doing or undoing his/her make-up and costume, and that the room is full of cosmetics and other preparations, with most of them having their fixed place; therefore the murderer must be very careful and not leave his fingerprints in spilled face powder, as the one in Night at the Vulcan does. It is also very hard to stage the body as a suicide when the actor was obviously in the middle of cleaning his face. So the murderer has always a hard time trying to fool Alleyn if the dressing room is the choice.

Although Agatha Christie never truly “smelled the greasepaint” offstage, her knowledge of every part of a building of a theatre is clearly visible in some of her novels, most notably in They Do It with Mirrors:

I want you to think of this place as at stage set, Inspector. […] Just like on the stage there are entrances and exits and the characters go out to different places. Only you don't think when you're in the audience where they are really going to. They go out “to the front door” or “to the kitchen” and when the door opens you see a little bit of painted backcloth. But really of course they go out to the wings - or the back of the stage with carpenters and electricians, and other characters waiting to come on - they go out - to a different world. (205-206)
Her descriptions might not be as detailed as Marsh’s, however, for the purposes of her plots they are sufficient enough.

2.2 Props and Sets

According to Mary Weinkauf, “usually the props Marsh introduces into her works are used as clues rather than weapons or motives.” (121) This thesis does not agree with her statement. On the contrary, while reading Marsh’s novels, one realizes that the main role of the props and other technical devices in a theatre is to complicate the matters, not to help the investigation. Their main functions are to kill someone (or at least to harm them), and to serve as red herrings or means by which the characters can tamper with the evidence.

One of the best examples of the various functions of props can be found in Light Thickens. The company at the Dolphin Theatre is rehearsing, and later performing, Macbeth, and someone keeps using the props in the wrong way, in particular the head and the sword. A stage artist models a head of Macbeth on Dougal Macdougal for the scene in the final act where Macduff fights Macbeth, wins and brings Macbeth’s head skewered on his sword. It is a very good modelling work, and it is only a pity that the head is never used for its right purpose. During the rehearsals, at one moment it plays the main part in a very bad theatrical joke: someone plants the mask covered in blood in Duncan’s chamber, and Simon Morten, playing Macduff, who goes there, is therefore scared to death. The result of the planted head is that Morten, probably for the first time in his life, does not have to pretend or play his emotions on stage – he simply has them. Peregrine Jay, being an experienced director, immediately recognizes it: “What was the matter? You’re both good actors but you don’t turn sheet-white out of sheer artistry. What went wrong?” (LT 79). This real unpretended horror occurs on the stage once
again, in the same scene in which Macduff kills Macbeth. Here the artificial head should fulfil its true purpose but, naturally, as one would expect in detective fiction, it does not. This time it is Macdougal’s real head that is pouring blood on the sword.

Since all the characters frequently talk about the sword, particularly because it looks really authentic, the reader expects it to play a vital role in the crime. It is no wonder then that the prop is used as a murder weapon that *truly* kills Macbeth. But it also causes some difficulties to Peregrine Jay, more or less unintentionally. At one rehearsal, where Jay works with the actors who play the witches, he shows them how to jump on the mattresses, hidden off-stage, without getting hurt (here Marsh lets the reader see some of the simple theatrical tricks). However, one of the child actors hid the sword in the mattresses, not from mischievousness but because he did not want anyone to know that he borrowed it, and, therefore, when Jay jumps, the iron prop hits his stomach.

Marsh probably tries to demonstrate here that in the theatre every object has its place. Moving the props or the sets can cause serious problems. Nevertheless, some of the characters violate this rule after a crime is committed, i.e. they tamper with the evidence. At any other place the detective might be fooled, unaware of whether the document was on the desk or in a drawer, or whether a statuette was supposed to be on the shelf or not, but in the theatre, there is always a technician (usually the property manager, simply called “props”) who is supposed to have all the props and other technical devices under control. Therefore, in *Enter a Murderer* Alleyn knows exactly that someone exchanged blank cartridges in the desk on the stage for live ones before the performance, and then tried to change them back again. The first act was done by the murderer, the second by the props. Alleyn’s deduction goes as follows:
“Props says the faulty cartridge only went wrong that night, when he dropped it. Unless he is lying, and he and the stage manager are in collusion, that means the dummies were in the top drawer just before the scene opened. Therefore the murderer substituted the lethal cartridges either immediately prior to, or during, the blackout, which lasted four minutes. He used gloves, took the dummies from the top drawer, substituted the real ones, put the dummies in the lower drawer, and got rid of the gloves. […] Surbonadier took the cartridges from the top drawer and loaded the revolver. During the scene that followed Gardener took the gun from him and fired point-blank in the usual way. The cartridges afterwards found in the gun were all live ones.” (78)

It is his perfect knowledge of the theatre and the play itself that makes him so certain. Similarly, in *Vintage Murder*, after the victim is killed by the bottle of champagne, he climbs the ladder to the fly loft to learn what happened. He finds out that the weight that should have counterweighted the bottle, was lighter than it was supposed to be. He knew that the technicians assured themselves several times by trying to cast the bottle on the strings, and therefore he is certain that someone must have gone there before the murder and change the weight. One might only wonder, why the characters try to tamper with the props at all. They are in the profession long enough to know that the technicians are very precise, and that even a slight change of location will be sooner or later recognized.

Since Agatha Christie does not set any of her novels in the theatre per se, her use of props is very limited. However, at one point, Miss Marple’s knowledge of stage devices (of how ‘they do it with mirrors’ during magic performances), solves the crime: “The conjuring trick. The trick when it wasn’t two people but one person. In there – in the study. We’re only looking at the visible part of the stage. Behind the scenes there is
a terrace and a row of windows.” (TDIwM 206) By using the windows as mirrors the murderer is able to create an illusion “in the same way that conjurers create illusions, to deceive an audience.” (ibid 211) The technical device here serves two purposes in which it resembles Marsh’s props – it is used both as an aid for the culprit and a clue for the sleuth.

2.3 Backstage Stars

This subchapter concentrates on the theatre personnel or staff whom the spectator cannot (or should not) see during the performance. Their role is very important, nevertheless, they do not receive so much appreciation as the actors. According to their functions, these people can be divided into two categories: pre-production, and production. As the titles suggest, for some of them their work finishes with the first lines of the performance, for others it is the beginning of their real work. Stage, costume and prop designers, the playwright, the producer, the manager, and, most importantly, the director, belong to the first group; the light and sound technicians, the dressers and the prompters to the other. Only the gatekeepers and/or watchmen stand outside these two categories.

The scene, costume, and prop designers are, in fact, artists, whose products can be admired but also disapproved by the audience. Marsh introduces one such character in the Night at the Vulcan. Jacques Doré paints both the sets and the faces, as he is not only a stage designer, but also a make-up artist. Another such character is introduced in Enter a Murderer, and appears again in Light Thickens– Jeremy Jones, Peregrine Jay’s best friend. He is a very good painter, but rather emotional, particularly where the historical artistic artefacts are concerned. In this he is very similar to Gaston Sears, a scholar, collector, actor and prop designer in the same novel, who models rubber masks
and artificial heads, one of which becomes the subject of the bad joke, mentioned above.

What the reader can learn about these characters is that they are slightly eccentric (as artists usually are) and probably too much dedicated to their profession, but very skilled and hardworking, although mostly somewhat behind the schedule.

The technicians are responsible for all the technical devices of the theatre, including the props. Therefore, after a murder is committed, they are always among the first people to be questioned by the police about the evidence. Their work is very precise, and although they always remain in the backdrop, they immediately appear if needed. They do not approve if people feel superordinate to them (as Fox often does), but they know their place, and are rather subservient to Alleyn, being a high authority for them, calling him “guv’nor”, as for example the props, Ernest James, does in *Light Thickens*. They always have strong accents, so that they can be distinguished in the dialogue from Alleyn or other theatre personnel. Since they are usually subjected to a heavy interrogation, and sometimes do not remember things or events properly, the reader, as well as an unexperienced police officer might find them rather suspicious. However, although they occasionally, intentionally or not, tamper with the evidence, Marsh never chooses them as murderers. On the contrary, some of them even fall victims to the criminal, as for example Bill in *Enter a Murderer*.

A character of a dresser also occurs in Marsh’s novels. The main function of these people is to quickly deal with everything and keep all the actor’s/actress’s secrets to themselves since they often passively participate in confidential conversations between their “superiors”. Their work stretches from a simple servant to a personal assistant, which means that they put themselves into a role of the doorkeepers of the dressing rooms. Their role in Marsh’s whodunits is more or less minor, appearing only five or six times during the whole novel (for example *Enter a Murderer*). The only exception is *Night at the Vulcan* where the temporary dresser, an aspiring young actress
Martyn Tarne, is the focus of the story. Here Marsh shows the dresser’s ungrateful position in the company. This may change slightly with the duration of their job, but even after twenty years spent in one actor’s/actress’s dressing room, they cannot hope to become their friends. There is still a certain gap, and, therefore, they can only admire the leading stars from the distance. The typical examples of this profession are Bob Cringle in *Night at the Vulcan*, and Bob Parsons in *Vintage Murder*, both taking their roles very seriously, acting somewhat as butlers of the dressing rooms.

Similarly to dressers, the roles of gatekeepers and watchmen are also very ungrateful. They are being ridiculed both by Marsh’s characters and the author herself, who consider them rather dull. They are usually either unsuccessful would-be actors, or former actors from amateur companies, mostly around sixty years of age. This explains their dramatic behaviour, and passion for Shakespeare, whose lines they know by heart, and are able to quote them in every situation. Singleton in *Vintage Murder* is one of the typical examples:

“Shakespeare!” ejaculated Mr. Singleton, removing his hat. “The Swan of Stratford-on-Sea! The Bard!”

“Nobody like him, is there?” said Alleyn cheerfully. “Well, Mr. Singleton, you’re about to take the stage again. I want you to tell us all about last night.”

“Last night of all when that same star did entertain her guests. An improvisation, Chief Constable, based on the Bard. Last night. I could a tale unfold would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood. As a matter of fact I am unable to do any such thing. Last night I merely discharged my degrading duties as a doorkeeper in the house of the ungodly, and repaired to my lonely attic.” (201)
Their behaviour and character make them possibly irritating for the reader (although they are one of the main sources of humour in the novels), difficult to co-operate with for the police (except for Alleyn who shares their passion for Shakespeare, and who can successfully deal with anyone), and highly unwanted for the murderers, since the gatekeepers have not only great memory for the lines, but also for ordinary matters – they are very observant and, because their occupation is rather monotonous, they remember anything slightly unusual that happens during their shift. They usually do not realize how important part they play in the investigation (for example, Singleton’s noticing of the manager wearing and not wearing a coat, in fact, solves the crime), and, therefore, the criminals do not always find it necessary to silence them.

The stage and/or general managers are given more space by Marsh. According to Hugh Morrison, manager’s “duties may include payment of artists’ salaries, company morale and discipline, supervision of theatre catering, rehearsing understudies, arranging tours, organizing rehearsal facilities, and certainly overseeing the work of the stage technicians”(100). It is no wonder then that Marsh’s managers are usually overworked and nervous, and they find themselves more important than they really are – from this arises their unpopularity among the members of the company. The reader would undoubtedly consider them rather annoying, and that might be one of the main reasons for their becoming either the victims (Alfred Meyer, Proprietor and Managing Director, in *Vintage Murder*), or the murderers (George Mason, Business Manager, ibid).

One of the most important persons in the theatre is the director. He/she supervises all creative elements of a theatre production, and usually also chooses the play and the cast. Marsh introduces one such character in *Killer Dolphin* – Peregrine Jay, who reappears again in *Light Thickens*. On him Marsh demonstrates the behaviour and characteristics of a typical director. As one can learn throughout Morrison’s book, a director should be both an authority and a friend to the actors, he should be less
emotional than the stars, he should give the actors a certain freedom of interpretation, and he should have the exact idea about the play. Perry Jay both confirms and violates these unwritten rules at one time. He tries to give his actors a free hand, however, the companies he works with usually have inner problems, strange relationships, and mannered actresses, and all of these reflect on the stage. Therefore, in the end, he has to force his own way upon the actors:

“Gertie, love,” he said, “it went back again, didn’t it? It was all honey and sweet reasonableness and it wouldn’t have risen one solitary hackle. She must grate. She must be bossy. He’s looking down the lane at that dark, pale creature who comes hopping into his life with such deadly seduction. And while he’s quivering, slap bang into this disturbance of—of his whole personality—comes your voice: scolding, demanding, possessive, always too loud. It must be like that, Gertie. Don’t you see? You must hurt. You must jangle.”

He waited. She said nothing.

“I can’t have it any other way,” Peregrine said. (KD 63)

He is a very steady person during the rehearsals, trying to keep down the actors’ and actresses’ emotions, and he also hates gossip and various kinds of superstitions. On the one hand, particularly the emotional actresses find him too strict, on the other hand, he is Alleyn’s favourite, since he is very easy to co-operate with. However, he tends to be rather passionate when talking to an outsider about producing a play in the theatre.

The director’s idea should be manifested in his/her introductory speech, and Jay does not fail to follow this tradition:
The moment had come when Peregrine must launch himself into one of those pre-production pep-talks upon which a company sets a certain amount of store. More, however, was expected of him, now, than the usual helping of “We’re all going to love this, so let’s get cracking” sort of thing. For once he felt a full validity in his own words when he clasped his hands over his play and said: “This is a great occasion for me.” (KD 53)

The reader might very easily come to like Perry Jay, in particular because of his sensible nature, modesty – “although it’s not a common or even appropriate emotion in a director-playwright“ – (KD 53), and helpfulness. Marsh therefore never involves him actively or negatively in any crime. On the contrary, she makes him a good asset to the investigation.

A special pre-production position in the theatre occupies the playwright. He/she usually appears at the first conference (exceptionally at auditions), and then only at the opening night. Their work is, or should be, finished long before the rehearsals begin. In this regard, they are not truly part of theatre personnel, nevertheless, they play an important role in meta-narrative whodunits by both Christie and Marsh, concretely Mrs McGinty’s Dead, and Grave Mistake. There are certain similarities and also differences between the two playwrights. Both Robin Upward in MMD and Verity Preston in GM have great experience with the way any theatre works. While Marsh’s Verity tends only to speak about the years she had spent both on and offstage, Christie’s character in fact uses his experience for his murder. He creates a staged crime scene that no one else recognizes since he is the only theatrical person present. One of the most significant characteristics they have in common is their constant ability to invent new ideas for their plays. The reader can find lines, such as “My dear, I've had the most marvelous idea for
the second act.” (MMD 127), or “Verity, in fact, had been wondering at the very moment if she could build a black comedy round Upper Quintern ingredients.” (GM 10-11) On the other hand, while Marsh created Mrs Preston to generally ridicule writing, and by that also herself, Christie has in this novel Mrs Oliver for these purposes – Robin Upward is here only in the role of an annoying murderer. As opposed to him, Verity Preston is probably the most sensible and likeable character in the story, and therefore it would be highly improbable for the reader to consider her as the culprit.

2.4 “Murder Live“

This rather television expression suggests a crime committed right on the stage, during the performance in front of the audience. As the first chapter tried to demonstrate, this phenomenon is very usual in the 20th century detective fiction – one can find such scenes, for example, in stories by Michael Innes or Caroline Graham. Ngaio Marsh sets the murder in the middle of a play in two novels: Enter a Murderer, and Light Thickens. Vintage Murder is also committed on the stage, but during a private birthday party, not a performance. In Night at the Vulcan the victim manages to stay alive until the end of the play, but is not able to return back for the curtain call.

All the authors do not fail to seat their inspectors in the audience – the murder is then even more surprising for the reader because he/she would not expect the murderer to be so presumptuous to committ a crime in front of the detective’s eyes. On the other hand, if the reader is at least slightly experienced with British whodunits, he/she would possibly presume the crime to be committed that way. The mere presence of the sleuth inspires a murder. As Alleyn says in Vintage Murder: “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?” (52-
What makes Alleyn’s sitting in the audience more special than Innes’s Appleby or Graham’s Barneby, is his broad knowledge of and great passion for theatre. He knows Shakespeare by heart, has a great memory for play lines in general, and is a very observant spectator.

One of the main reasons for his theatrical knowledge is the fact that if he wants to watch a play, he has to watch it twice. At any opening night, and it does not matter whether in the Vulcan, the Unicorn, or the Dolphin, there is always at least one member of the Royal family present in the special box. Alleyn, being the Chief Superintendent of Scotland Yard, is usually asked to attend the performance and watch, or, rather, guard the aristocrat. As Peregrine Jay in *Light Thickens* explains to one of the actors, Alleyn does not “get an uninterrupted view on the first night [because] he has to sit watching the audience and not the actors” (116). Therefore, he always buys tickets “for a seat later in the season when he can watch the play rather than the house” (96). His friend, Nigel Bathgate, has a similar problem, since he is a critic, and at the opening night he is usually taking notes instead of fully enjoying the play. One can observe that, for example, in *Enter a Murderer*, where Nigel judges one actor’s qualities, and compares them to his previous performance. In this novel Alleyn watches the play for the first time and is dragged in the plot, until it is interrupted by a murder committed right on the stage.

Felix Gardener, the murderer in the novel who also appears in conversations between Alleyn and other actors in several later novels, invents an ingenious plan for a murder. The company at the Unicorn practice and perform a play called *The Rat and the Beaver*, presumably about two gangsters who fight against each other. In the end the Rat is supposed to shoot the Beaver. Gardener, playing the Rat, takes the revolver from the desk, loads it with the cartridges from the drawer (all prepared by the props), and in the following act shoots the Beaver. However, at the end of this scene, Surbonadier, playing
the Beaver, is truly dead. Gardener’s genius is based on the assumption that no one will suspect him being the real killer. Everyone presumes that someone else tampered with either the revolver or the cartridges. Marsh here wants to fool the reader in particular, for she, understandably, makes Gardener the first suspect, and then, because she expects the reader to think that this would be too easy a solution, moves her attention to other characters. For a long time she even manages to outwit her sleuth. The reason is that he saw the play for the first time, and enjoyed it as a story – he did not pay attention to the movements of all the actors, and the exact time they spent on the stage (as he usually does in later novels, because every theatre and every play is a potential crime scene for him) – therefore, the murderer has to expose himself in the end. The reader must be undoubtedly surprised by the denouement, as one of the unwritten rules of detective fiction is that the obvious suspect should not be the murderer.

In *Light Thickens* the situation is somewhat different. The actual act of murder happens backstage, since it is usual that Macduff and Macbeth leave the stage during their combat, and Macduff then returns back with the head. It would be rather difficult to perform the beheading in front of the audience without doing it for real. Nevertheless, even if the murder is committed off-stage, it is during the performance, with Alleyn, again, in the auditorium. Here he watches it already for the second time, and therefore pays more attention to minor things that does not concern the plot. Apart from the actors, he is the first one to realize that something is wrong. The whole killing scene, like the one in *Enter a Murderer*, as Weinkauf also notices, is “too realistic” (107).

Alleyn is better acquainted with the play this time, since it is his favourite Elizabethan classic, and therefore knows, more or less, the exact time between the scenes, or the time necessary for someone to reappear on the stage, etc. He starts his investigation by saying:
“We’re trying at the moment to sort out when the crime was committed and then when the heads were changed. Macbeth’s last words are *Hold, enough*. He and Macduff then fight and a marvelous fight it was. He exits and we assume was killed at once. There’s a pause. Then pipe and drums coming nearer and nearer. Then a prolonged entry of everyone left alive in the cast. Then dialogue between Malcolm and Old Siward. Macduff comes in with Gaston Sears following him, the head on his giant weapon.” (*LT* 126)

By trying it himself, which is one of his typical procedures, he soon finds out that it takes exactly three minutes – enough time for a murder. His knowledge of the play, his passion for the theatre, and his own good acting (which he occasionally uses in front of Nigel or Fox), lead, in the end, to the reconstruction where all the remaining actors have to “play it again”. During such moments the reader learns lots of information about the temporal and spatial matters of acting and is provided with a deeper analysis of the play in question.

As Earl Bargainnier points out, Marsh’s novels show “her deep love of the theatre, in spite of her recognition of its jealousies, pretensions, and eccentricities” (qtd. in Weinkauf 15). The reader can feel it, particularly in passages in which she responsively describes the backstage chaos half an hour before the beginning of the opening night, or the atmosphere of an empty stage and auditorium:

Now he was onstage, as a man of the theatre should be, and at once he felt much easier—exhilarated even, as if some kind of authority had passed to him by right of entry. He walked into [the shaft of sunshine],
stood by the broken chair and faced the auditorium. Quite dazzled and bemused by the strange tricks of light, he saw the front of the house as something insubstantial and could easily people it with Mr. Ruby’s patrons. Beavers, bonnets, ulsters, shawls. A flutter of programmes. Rows of pale discs that were faces. “Oh, wonderful!” (KD 16)
3 ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE

3.1 …and All the Men and Women Merely Players

“They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his life plays many parts.” (As You Like It 2.7.141-42) This is valid not only with regard to the life cycle (as Shakespeare intends it in the first place), but also in a small-spaced and time-limited world of a whodunit. In Marsh’s and Christie’s whodunits, there is always a certain pattern in the choice of characters. As Mary Weinkauf argues: “The [theatre] company, not surprisingly, follows most closely the closed society of the classic mystery detective novel” (49-50). However, she fails to provide the reader with the comparison between the theatre personnel and typical dramatis personae of a Golden Age whodunit. In every theatre, or rather, in every traditional play, there appear: the leading lady, the leading man, juvenile lead, the character actors, bit-part, and the comic part. And, of course, on the other side is the audience and the critics. It is natural that these characters are present in theatrical whodunits, however, even novels that develop their plots around country mansions contain most of them. One can find here the Lord and his wife, or an elderly lady (someone’s rich mother or aunt) and her suitor, in the lead; the grandchild; the sons and daughters and their partners, or the party guests, with their secrets and strange manners, as character actors; a nephew or the youngest son with comical and ironical remarks; and butlers, maids and the solicitor, playing the bit-parts. The reader is given the seat in the auditorium, always at least one step behind the critics-investigators.

In choosing the actors, Marsh follows one of the typical features of theatre. As Hugh Morrison says in his book:
…the actor’s first question must be “Why me?”, and the first answer to that question may well be because the part is like the actor, in the broader general terms of personality. Another answer might be that the role needs certain technical skills that the actor possesses: a quality of voice, speech, or movement; or even that the actor’s previous experience is useful to the playing of the part… (54)

Therefore, Marsh, in fact, places herself into the role of the director or producer, and the reader into the role of the manager: she gives an explanation for selecting this particular actor for each role, mentioning his or her characteristics, behaviour and abilities. The best examples of this can be found in Killer Dolphin where Perry Jay and his friend Jeremy Jones are creating a preliminary cast, or in Vintage Murder where Alleyn secretly observes the company on the train, and allows the reader to follow his thoughts on each of them.

The actors are not only “players” in the Shakespearean metaphorical sense – acting is not only their attitude, it is part of their profession. Since it is difficult for them to separate these two worlds, they usually behave rather theatrically even outside the theatre. First of all, it should be mentioned that the younger actors tend to be more dramatical than the older ones. It is usually less complicated for the police to co-operate with the great Leading Men or Leading Ladies, since these characters are less likely to be overwhelmed by their emotions (Susan Max, reappearing in several Marsh’s novels, is one of the best examples). On the other hand, they might be, and very often are, affected by so many years of the audience’s appreciation, and respect from younger colleagues. Their behaviour is usually kindly overlooked by other characters, there are cases, however, in which the lofty manners might lead to a tragic scenario concluded with an expected murder (for example, an old and mentally unstable actress Mary
Bellamy in False Scent). Agatha Christie introduces a milder version of such a character in *Three Act Tragedy*:

He’s always been the same – a better actor in private life than on the stage! Charles is always acting. He can’t help it – it’s second nature to him. Charles doesn’t go out of the room – he “makes an exit” – and he usually has to have a good line to make it on. […] After all, Charles is human – he needs his audience. (16)

What Christie probably tries to suggest here, is that these actors might not be aware of their theatrical behaviour – it is deeply rooted in their nature. The only exception is, again, Susan Max who knows the odd behaviour of actors well enough, and tries to avoid it. She cannot, however, avoid the typical theatre vocabulary: “‘Well, he tried it on with Carolyn Dacres and believe me it took him right off,’” said Susan, becoming technical. “‘As soon as the funny business started she was well up-stage and Mr. Ackroyd made a quiet exit with no rounds of applause.’” (*VM* 123)

The younger generation of actors and actresses (those who are 30-50 years of age) is the most theatrical one. It is these people who cause most trouble to the detectives during the investigation. The actresses are usually portrayed as very pretty, and therefore flirtatious and rather egoistical. As Christie describes one of her murderesses, Jane Wilkinson: “‘Oh! Jane’s an egoist,’ agreed Mrs Widburn. ‘An actress has got to be, though. That is, if she wants to express her personality.’” (*LED* 17). They demand constant attention and admiration from all the men present in the room. It is usually the husbands and male colleagues from the company who do not approve of this behaviour, as Marsh shows in *Vintage Murder*:
“Where’s Madame?” shouted George Mason jovially.

Led by Meyer, they went to find out. Alleyn, who, with Mason, had joined Hambledon, wondered if she was instinctively or intentionally delaying her entrance. […] At last a terrific rumpus broke out in the passage that led to the dressing-rooms. Carolyn’s golden laugh, Carolyn saying “O-o-oh!” like a sort of musical train whistle, Carolyn sweeping along with three men in her wake. The double doors of the stage-set were thrown open by little Ackroyd, who announced like a serio-comic butler:

“Enter Madame!” (44)

Here Marsh shows another feature of the younger generation of actors: they very often behave theatrically on purpose, ridiculing themselves. They are much more aware of their acting off-stage (“Actors are a rum lot,” say both Hambledon in *Vintage Murder*, and Gardener in *Enter a Murderer*) than the older generation. Marsh tries to amuse the reader with scenes like these:

“Good morning, Mrs. Meyer,” said Hambledon and kissed her fingers with the same light gesture he had so often used on the stage.

“Good morning, Mr. Hambledon.” They spoke with that unnatural and half-ironical gaiety that actors so often assume when greeting each other outside the theatre. (*VM* 34)

The third generation of the company members (18-30 years of age) usually consists of aspiring young actresses with more (Martyn Tarne) or less (Gay Gainsford,
Sonia Orrincourt) talent – the more talent they lack on the stage, however, the better they act outside the theatre; and young actors playing romantic parts, who are either arrogant or bright and witty, or sometimes both. One of the best examples can be found in *Lord Edgware Dies*, in the character of Ronald:

Oh! yes, case against the Wicked Nephew. Guilt is to be thrown on the hated Aunt by Marriage. Nephew, celebrated at one time for acting female parts, does his supreme histrionic effort. In a girlish voice he announces himself as Lady Edgware and sidles past the butler with mincing steps. No suspicions are aroused. “Jane,” cries my fond uncle. “George,” I squeak. I fling my arms about his neck and neatly insert the penknife. (97)

The eager young actresses are well-known (to both Alleyn and Poirot) for their hysterics and absurd phobias, and are therefore found highly suspicious by all the police officers. The young men are usually among the first to be questioned, but the reader realizes soon enough that their role is more of the company comic than the murderer.

3.2 Fears and Phobias

The theatre, or a circle of actors, is one of the most useful settings for a whodunit, mostly because it gives the author an opportunity to implement the actors’ and actresses’ fears. Since they are very emotionalistic and passionate, they are overwhelmed by a large number of various phobias and superstitions. However, the
other characters, who are not of the same profession, do not give weight to them, considering them only part of the acting, and the murder is then used as a proof of their mistake. On the other hand, in some cases, the murderer bases his/her crime on these fears, and intentionally feeds them.

It is interesting that a corpse in the theatre leaves the actors more or less unmoved, but they are able to lose their nerves anytime _Macbeth_ is quoted. While they are accustomed to a murder, playing it many times on the stage, they live in a constant unreasonable fear of various superstitions. Peregrine Jay says in _Killer Dolphin_: “…we _act_ it. It’s our raw material. Murder. Violence. Theft. Sexual greed. They’re commonplace to us. We do our Stanislavsky over them. We search out motives and associated experiences. We try to think our way into Macbeth or Othello or a witch-hunt or an Inquisitor or a killer-doctor at Auschwitz…” (108). One can see in the novels explored that the actors do not panic after the crime. Even if there are several rather hysterical actresses, who are even afraid of thunder (Blondie in _Light Thickens_), they stay perfectly calm after the murder is committed. Hearing someone whistling, however, terrifies them more than anything.

Where does the charm of superstitions reside then, and how do Christie and Marsh use it to “spice” the plot? One of the most well-known superstitions, with possibly the longest tradition, is the “Curse of Macbeth”. According to Robert Faires’s article, the curse dates back to Jacobean Era, when “a boy named Hal Berridge, who was to play Lady Macbeth at the play's opening on August 7, 1606, was unfortunately stricken with a sudden fever and died. It fell to the playwright himself to step into the role”. There are several versions of the malediction: it could have been done by Shakespeare himself, or by some real witches in the audience; or there is no curse at all – the first accidents in the 17th century might have simply been caused by bad luck or
the low quality of props and sets. Faires then provides a list of various accidents and
catastrophes that occurred during the rehearsals or performances from the 18th century
onwards, which serves as a nice explanation for the superstitions. The actors therefore
never mention the real title, calling it usually “The Scottish Play” or simply “The Play”; and
never quote from it, except for when rehearsing and performing it. When anyone
violates this rule, a tragedy of some kind is expected. It is, therefore, a perfect topic for
a whodunit, and it is only understandable that Ngaio Marsh centres the whole plot of
*Light Thickens* around this superstition.

The characters of this novel can be divided into three groups according to their
attitude to the curse. There are those who take it seriously, those who take advantage of
it, and those who try to disprove it. It could be said that, generally, the curse would not
have such a great impact, if the actors were not so fond of quoting. From the novels
examined arises the fact that the actors cannot lead any discussion without involving
Shakespeare. Situations such as these are very common:

“I’m paying, all of you. No arguments. Yes, I insist. *That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold,*” he shouted.

His voice faded out and so, raggedly, did all the others. Blondie’s giggle persisted and died. A single voice — Angus’s — asked uncertainly:


The reader can only expect then, that one or more of the characters will play on the
timorousness of the others. Ngaio Marsh, however, does not use this device for murder,
but for the “practical jokes”, as Alleyn and Gaston Sears call it, involving the artificial
decapitated heads, mentioned in the second chapter of this thesis. This causes great panic, particularly among the younger actors. Perry Jay, as the most sensible member of the company, tries to dispel this general feeling, but the further the rehearsals proceed, the more difficult it is. At one point he starts having his own doubts, after he is hurt by the sword hidden in the mattresses, but in the end he decides to hide his injuries in order not to feed the general panic.

Although it is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, the murder itself is clearly based on the superstition. Not on the fear, however, but on the implementation. Most of the Macbeth accidents happen, naturally, during the rehearsal or performance of the combat between Macbeth and Macduff: the medieval swords are heavy, and if the actors are not skilled and trained enough, or if one of them loses concentration, the result might be rather painful. Robert Faires humorously points to this fact, giving several examples from the 20th-century British stages. The knowledge of the previous accidents (which the characters do have, since they mention an existing book, Supernatural on Stage: Ghosts and Superstitions in the Theatre by Richard Huggett, several times) provides the murderer with good opportunity for homicide. He could always blame the curse for the death of Dougal Macdougal alias Macbeth. A similar situation can be found in Final Curtain. Alleyn’s wife Troy talks to Sir Henry Ancred, a former great actor, about the Macbeth curse. He is an experienced man, and therefore his attitude towards it is a rational one: “There’s always a heavy feeling offstage during performances. People are nervy. […] You can’t escape the feeling. But the piece has never been unlucky for me. […] If it were otherwise, should I have chosen this role for my portrait? Assuredly not.” (47) The experienced reader of whodunits might already expect Marsh to disprove Sir Henry’s false belief, and is not entirely surprised when Sir Henry is murdered two chapters later. Although the two novels regard the superstition in different perspectives, it is always used as a presage for the crime.
There are undoubtedly more theatre superstitions (as one can also learn through *Listverse*), but in Marsh’s novels only another one appears – the whistling. The author of the Internet article explains that “It is considered bad luck to whistle on or off stage, as someone (not always the whistler) will be fired.” Marsh agrees, only limits it to the dressing rooms:

In the room opposite to Poole’s and next to the Greenroom, Parry could hear Bennington’s dresser moving about whistling softly through his teeth. There is a superstition in the theatre that it’s unlucky to whistle in a dressing-room and Parry knew that the man wouldn’t do it if Ben had arrived. He didn’t much like the sound of it himself, and moved on to J.G. Darcey’s room. (*NatV* 104)

This superstition does not have any deadly consequences in the novel – rather the opposite: since everyone backstage heard Bob whistling, it gave him a perfect alibi for the time of the murder. To prove the truthfulness of the article stated above, Marsh has to dismiss someone: in this case it is an untalented young actress Gay Gainsford.

Christie also employs a superstition in one of her novels examined here – it is not a theatrical one, but the actors are involved. It is the superstition of the “unlucky thirteen”. In *Lord Edgware Dies*, one of the theatre characters, Donald Ross, comes to Hastings, feeling uneasy about a party that took place the previous day.

‘We were thirteen. Some fellow failed at the last minute. We never noticed till just the end of dinner.’

‘And who got up first?’ I asked.
He gave a queer little nervous cackle of laughter.

‘I did,’ he said. (116)

Again, similarly to Marsh and the Macbeth’s curse, it is only expected that Ross should die somewhat later in the story, to confirm the famous unluckiness of the number.

3.3 Truths vs. Masks

As one may realize, in whodunits the actors and actresses use their immoderate emotionality, their tendency to “act” even outside the theatre, and their (un)usual behaviour on purpose. This feature is probably the most important reason for setting the whodunits among the group of “players”. Both Marsh and Christie use the pretence and deceit in their novels; it seems, however, that Alleyn is more immune to acting than Poirot. While Alleyn only pretends to be outwitted and dull (it is his way of “acting”, as shown later), Poirot is much easier to be truly deceived. The possible reason is that Poirot is not as acquainted with the world of the theatre as Alleyn is. Mary Weinkauf also notices this fact: “He can see through the best of actors, too. As an experienced critic, Alleyn can tell when people are putting on acts.” (23) In Enter a Murderer, Alleyn says to Nigel Bathgate and several police officers: “I've been telling it to myself ever since this started. We're up against good acting.” (70)

However, he is possibly the only one, including the reader and the other characters in the novels, who is able to distinguish between real emotions and acting. The reader and the less important detectives are usually left in the dark of the auditorium to form their own interpretations. Christie never indicates the truthfulness or untruthfulness of the actors’ behaviour, and the reader is then confused and lost, since,
in Lord Edgware Dies, for example, he follows the thoughts of Hastings who is famous for being constantly mistaken. Marsh sometimes lets the reader know Alleyn’s ideas; there are novels, however, where the readers have to make their own picture, like in the case of the Ancreds in Final Curtain.

The Ancreds are one of the most theatrical families in the history of a whodunit. Not only do all of them work in “the business”, they also live theatrically. They have their bedrooms named after famous actors and actresses (Siddons, Garrick, Bernhardt, Bracegirdle, etc.), their family dinners resemble various conversational comedies with occasional outbursts of rage, and, most importantly, they are very emotional. Nigel Bathgate writes in his letter to Alleyn’s wife Troy:

“Collectively and severally the Ancreds, all but one, are over-emotionalised. Anyone attempting to describe or explain their behaviour must keep this characteristic firmly in mind, for without it they would scarcely exist. Sir Henry Ancred is perhaps the worst of the lot, but, because he is an actor, his friends accept his behaviour as part of his stock-in-trade…” (FC 13)

By “all but one” Nigel means Thomas Ancred, who is a director, not an actor, and therefore does not show his feelings so openly. Because of that, both Troy and the reader tend to exclude him from the circle of suspects, and they are not mistaken. It is self-evident that the criminal must be one of his “acting” relatives.

As suggested above, the over-emotionality is very typical of actors. It is the reader’s and the sleuth’s task to decide what is still real and what is mere pretending. Usually the main investigators are more open-minded than the ordinary police officers. As Inspector Japp puts it: “Took hysterics – that’s what she did. Rolled herself about, threw
up her arms and finally flopped down on the ground. Oh! she did it well – I’ll say that for her. A pretty bit of acting.” (LED 40) It is, in fact, a game that the actors play with the detectives, and the author with the reader – whom should the detective/reader believe? Mary Weinkauf claims that “once on stage in their true environment the [actors] are real” (40). Paradoxically, it is true: they put on the masks outside the theatre, not inside. In their dressing rooms or during the performances they metaphorically “wear their hearts on their sleeves” – this results in the too realistic acting, such as the last act of The Rat and the Beaver and the unpretended hatred and rivalry between Surbonadier and Gardener in Enter a Murderer.

There are several kinds of behaviour that are pretended, or considered to be pretended, most usually. First and foremost, it is the grief. Particularly the grief of a young actress mourning for the death of her old husband. Both the reader and the police officers are limited by this typical stereotype of the traditional detective novel, immediately “pointing their fingers” on her and considering her the prime suspect. Therefore, they are later highly surprised by the author who has her murdered in the following chapters, as, for example, Marsh does in Final Curtain. Shock is another of the often pretended acts. The characters are shocked by the murder, but it is apparent that for one of them the amazement is sheer playing. It is the detective’s task to set a trap for him or her and uncover the mask. Alleyn manages to do so with Felix Gardener in Enter a Murderer. And, finally, there is the fear. Actors live under various phobias, and Bryan Martin in Lord Edgware Dies relies on this fact. He expresses his fear of being followed by a suspicious man. He provides a full description of him, refuses to reveal some important pieces of information because it might be dangerous to him, and, since Poirot is not experienced with actors, Bryan is able to fool him almost until the last chapter.
However, there are also emotions which are difficult to pretend. As Alleyn notices about the theatre company in New Zealand:

This, he told himself, was natural enough, since they must assume that they were in the presence of grief, and there is nothing more embarrassing than other people’s sorrow. “But not to these people,” thought Alleyn, “since they have histrionic precedents for dealing with sorrow. They are embarrassed for some other reason.” (*VM* 78)

The sleuth must be experienced in the theatre world, or in the processes of human mind, or preferably both, to unveil the truth. Since the reader usually does not possess these abilities, he/she should inevitably be less successful in “guessing” the truth.

3.4 Pulling the Strings

George Grella notices that “the characters who dwell in the usual settings of detective fiction […] are often criticized as mere puppets and stereotypes.” (34) For Grella, the characters are puppets because they occur repetitively in different stories, their behaviour and faith is almost the same, they have no feelings or development whatsoever, and they “are modern versions of the humors characters of Roman, Renaissance, and Restoration comedy, people governed by an emblematic function, a single trait, or a necessity of plot.” (40) However, it appears that the puppetry in whodunits is present in more forms than this single one.

In detective fiction, there are generally three kinds of puppeteers and two kinds of puppets. Those who “pull the strings” are the author, the murderer and the main sleuth; those who are being “played with” are the reader, and the other characters in the
story. Singer points out that “riddling is a form of social interaction that involves an asymmetric power relationship.” (158) The author thus challenges the reader in a battle of wits which is impossible for the reader to win, since he/she will always have less information that the author. Therefore, the reader is only a puppet in the author’s hands – he can observe only what he is allowed to see. As he cannot be equal to the author, the reader tries at least to “match his intellect against the detective’s”, but usually fails even in this endeavour because he/she “seldom possesses the detective's exotic knowledge and superior reason”, and therefore “the important clues often mean little to him.” (Grella 31)

What are, then, the main weapons of the author by which she wants to defeat the reader, and with what equipment does the reader try to fight back and snip the strings? Eliot Singer suggests that “too much information becomes the dominant strategy for misleading the reader.” (161) This is rather typical of both Christie and Marsh. Introducing more than ten suspects may confuse the reader, as well as may a large number of red herrings. By setting the plot in the theatre, for example, Marsh necessarily has to produce a large company of characters, exceeding the reader’s ability to remember – it is not surprising that she always provides the dramatis personae at the beginning of each of her novels. *Nemesis* is one of the most perplexing cases written by Christie. The retrospective moves, the intertwined family relations, or the setting changes, almost make it impossible for the reader to attempt any active part in the game of wits, and he/she voluntarily lets the author guide him/her – the reader is then metaphorically hanging on the strings, watching the plot only passively.

Another form of puppetry is the author’s use of “contradictions” (Singer 162) – the situations that go beyond reason – for example, when a character is supposed to be in two places at one time (*Lord Edgware Dies, They do It with Mirrors*), when there is seemingly no murderer present but the murders still occur (*Ten Little Niggers*), or when
the crime is committed vicariously or even by the main sleuth himself (both in Christie’s *Curtain*). In these cases the reader is as helpless as the characters of the story. What also makes the reader a mere puppet, is, paradoxically, his own reason. As Singer points out: “Agatha Christie preys upon the reader’s tendency to confuse expectations with norms to invent generic blockers for her mysteries.” (166) By ‘generic blockers’ he means the traditional or expected solutions to riddles that limit the reader’s viewpoint. With Christie, for example, the most obvious suspect is often the true culprit – she relies on the fact that the reader would find this solution too easy and against the unwritten rules of detective fiction. Therefore, in a good whodunit, the reader is never allowed to wholly get control over his strings, and must always be led and astonished by the author.

A somewhat different kind of puppet relationship is that between the murderer and his victims. This phenomenon can be demonstrated on two novels: *Ten Little Niggers* and *Final Curtain*. In order to become a puppeteer, the murderer must consider the crime, individual phases of its realization, and its cover very carefully and in advance. He/she must not forget any detail, and any possibility of interpretation or a way of investigation. Most importantly, he/she must trap his victims, either literally, locking them in a house, or metaphorically, in their own head (reason). If they are to become his puppets, the victims cannot be given any opportunity to escape from his dominance. Therefore the characters in *Ten Little Niggers* are trapped on the island, calling themselves “fellow prisoners” since it is a prison, indeed. After killing all the previous eight “little niggers”, the murderer leads the last one to commit suicide. The reader can almost see Vera Claythorne with her limbs tied to the strings, stepping on the chair, and Justice Wargrave, with a devilish grin, looking from above and moving the wooden control bar. For after several murders, the remaining characters do not have free will any longer, and let themselves be governed by the nursery rhyme, planted by the murderer.
In *Final Curtain* the murderer “plays” with the characters by means of many red herrings. While all the Ancreds might be easily confused, the reader should be rather suspicious, as the seeming clues point to several suspects, not one. It would be highly improbable for three people to commit one murder differently. This uncertainty causes a tension not unlike to the one in *Ten Little Niggers* (as Lombard says: “[The murderer] is one of us. No exceptions allowed. We all qualify.” – *TLN* 99). A message written in grease-paint is, for example, found on Sir Henry’s mirror; or the same grease-paint is on a cat; and Troy’s portrait is destroyed with red paint. These pieces of evidence lead inevitably to a small girl, Panty, because they seem to be a creation of an infant mind.

Other red herrings are connected to the poison that was used to kill Sir Henry – there is a book of poisons in the house library, and the murderess never fails to inform her relatives as well as Alleyn about the fact that everyone of them at one point browsed through the book; the poison itself (a tin of rat-bane) is used as a red herring when the murderess plants it in her step-mother’s suitcase. And, most importantly, there are anonymous threatening letters. Since the step-mother did not get one, she becomes immediately the prime suspect in the eyes of the other members of the family. This is the murderess’s best trick – by sending one letter to herself, but not to someone else, she is out of suspicion. At least until Alleyn comes and takes charge of the puppet strings.

What arises from the previous paragraphs, is the fact that the competitors in the game of murder do not occupy equal positions – whether it is the culprit against the victims, the detective against the suspects, or even the author against the reader – the duels always have foreordained winners. Since every classic whodunit is a puzzle where each piece is shaped in advance, and only its creator knows the original state of it, the competition must inevitably end with relief and triumph of one party, and confusion and surprise of the other. It is clear that the advantaged one invites his/her opponent into a
foul play – this foul play is even more visible in the theatrical world of pretence and masking.

3.5 The Reconstruction

As the plot of a detective story proceeds, the main sleuth starts to become the puppeteer, gradually turning the murderer into another marionette. The process culminates in the final reconstruction of the crime. As George Grella points out:

The typical detective story presents a group of people assembled at an isolated place who discover that one of their number has been murdered. They summon the local constabulary, who are completely baffled; they find either no clues or entirely too many, everyone or no one has had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime, and nobody seems to be telling the truth. To the rescue comes an eccentric, intelligent, unofficial investigator who reviews the evidence, questions the suspects, constructs a fabric of proof, and in a dramatic final scene, names the culprit. (30)

Christie and Marsh use different devices during the reconstruction (the “dramatic final scene”), the former is more explanatory, the latter more visual and less static, but they both ensure that the detective has all control over the situation. Poirot usually gathers the whole company, tells them the whole story, confusing them purposely by pointing at several of them during his speech, and in his final sentence reveals the murderer. The other characters are only allowed to slightly protest, nonetheless, in the end, all of them are defeated by his wit.
Although Marsh in her novels also adheres to this traditional pattern, her characters participate more actively in the final scene. It is caused by the differences between Alleyn and Poirot. While the Belgian detective relies on his “little grey cells”, as he calls them, and lets someone else do the work, Alleyn is less passive, investigating the scene and clues, climbing the ladders to the fly lofts, or probing the gardens – he is more of an actor, playing along with the characters. And a “fairly competent actor”, as Mary Weinkauf suggests. “In the later novels he will perform on his own stage. One recurring role he plays is that of the absent-minded policeman with the ‘filthy memory’” (23). It is one of the best examples of his puppetry – by pretending what he is not, he immediately becomes an unforced authority for the other characters, and it is very easy for him then, to pull the imaginary strings attached to all of them. His dramatic reconstructions can be demonstrated on two novels: Enter a Murderer, and A Man Lay Dead.

As Bargainnier notices, for Alleyn is typical “his theatricality and facetiousness”, particularly his evidently dramatic entrances, or, more importantly, “a dramatic close to a big case” (10WoM 86). In those theatrical cases where the murder is committed right on the stage in the middle of the performance, he always makes the actors and actresses play it again, only for him, so that he can follow every move and steps of each of them. In Enter a Murderer he gathers the whole company and says:

“I merely ask the innocent members of the company to rehearse a particular scene in order to verify my theory as regards the movements of the guilty individual. I most earnestly beg of you to behave exactly as you did, so far as you can remember, during the last performance of this scene. I give you this opportunity to vindicate yourselves and at the same time establish the case which we shall bring before the court. I
appeal to you to play fair. As innocent individuals you have nothing to fear. Is it agreed?” (163)

It is not this reconstruction, however, during which the culprit is revealed – in that Marsh is different from Christie: while Poirot or Miss Marple in their final closures exclaim “You did it!”, pointing their fingers on the murderer, Alleyn uses the reconstruction only to confirm his theory, not to “pick” one of them. He usually unveils his steps and procedure only to Fox (or another policeman) in a letter, or at least in private. This is his kind of puppetry: unless the murderer reveals himself in front of the others, Alleyn usually does not tell the other characters immediately who committed the crime, and leaves them all in confusion and uncertainty.

In *A Man Lay Dead* it is not a play, but a game, that is being re-played in the end. As shown in the final chapter, the game enables the murderer to pull the strings and be the puppeteer, until the final reconstruction where Alleyn takes control of the situation.

“The simplest way of making myself clearly understood is to reconstruct the machinery of the murder. To do this I must ask for your assistance. We shall need two persons to play the parts of the victim and of the murderer as the police have visualized them. Perhaps someone will volunteer to give me this much assistance” (145)

As Alleyn already knows who the murderer is, he makes him play his part without letting anyone know what he knows: “Mr. Wilde. It is my theory that the murderer slid down the bannister rail, took the knife from the leather strip on the wall there with his right hand, leant across and drove it home. Will you mimic his movements along those
This performance definitively confirms Alleyn’s theory, and he can then arrest Wilde. The criminal becomes Alleyn’s puppet without knowing it.

Since Poirot is more of a narrator than an actor, his reconstructions are different from Alleyn’s in realization but similar in confusing the characters present. It is a “one-man-show” against mass performance, nevertheless, the control bar is still in the successful fingers of the sleuth. Poirot, and similarly also Miss Marple, achieve their aims by “passive” acting. Their intention is to look harmless to other characters, by pretending that they are too old to understand something, in case of Poirot there is also a seeming language barrier, so that the characters would reveal their secrets to them. Therefore Poirot and Miss Marple play a role of an actor-listener: in situations where Holmes would have to disguise himself in order to deceive the criminal, Christie’s sleuths are more astute, hidden under the mask of kindness.
4 META-WHODUNIT

The expression covers a whole range of meanings and topics; however, it would be wise to start with staged murders, since they combine both theatricality and meta-narrative, and therefore form a certain kind of bridge between the third and the fourth chapters.

4.1 Staged Murder

“Staging a scene occurs when the perpetrator purposely alters the crime scene to mislead the authorities and/or redirect the investigation,” says Vernon J. Geberth on his web site. He then explains further: “In staged crime scenes, the presentation of the homicide victim and the manipulation of the crime scene by a clever offender could make the death appear to be a suicide or an accident.” This thesis, however, gives the expression a new definition – a more theatrical one. The staged murder here means any kind of homicide that looks unnatural, as if done on the stage – the corpse is in a strange position or costume, and the realization resembles a theatre performance, or is based on a play.

Agatha Christie is a master of such murders: since she usually does not set her crimes on the real stage, she stages the murders at least indirectly. One of the homicides, in the novels explored, that most closely resembles Geberth’s definition, is *The Body in the Library*. A dead woman is planted there to mislead the police officers and the reader (but not Miss Marple), and she looks unnaturally picturesque, as an actress (the reader later realizes that she was a dancer):
The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening dress of white spangled satin; the face was heavily made up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue, swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The fingernails were enameled a deep blood red, and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. (21-22)

It is no coincidence that she was found in a library – as Colonel Bantry points out, “bodies are always being found in libraries in books.” (ibid 13) Therefore, it is soon evident to all the characters that she was planted there. It also confirms the fact that murders are very often based on other, fictional or real, whodunits: “It's that detective story you were reading, The Clue of the Broken Match. You know. Lord Edgbaston finds a beautiful blonde dead on the library hearth rug,” (ibid 13) says Colonel again.

Probably the best example of a staged murder can be found in Ten Little Niggers, in the character of Lawrence John Wargrave. His “death” is a typical theatrical scene, including the costume (“Mr. Justice Wargrave was sitting in his high-backed chair at the end of the room. Two candles burnt on either side of him. But what shocked and startled the onlookers was the fact that he sat there robed in scarlet with a judge’s wig upon his head.” - 141), after which the reader should, and often does, start feeling certain suspicions towards the criminal scheme. It is a nice trick, developed by the author, whose main goal is a complete confusion – it is a part of the puppet show directed both by the writer and the murderer. His costume and pose resemble a character of a solicitor in Restoration drama, played by an amateur company – sitting on a judge’s chair in a courtroom, dramatically illuminated by two candles that probably create horrific
grimaces on his face (an example of limited options of using lighting in theatre), and a makeshift costume created of a curtain and grey wool. It is a demonstration of great imagination of the author, by means of the murderer, and it also demands visual imagination from the reader.

The most theatrical of Christie’s murders, however, can be found in *Three Act Tragedy*, and *Sleeping Murder*. In the former, Poirot realizes only towards the end of the story that the first murder was not important, as far as the victim is concerned. The plan itself and the performance were much more significant, since they served as a prequel to the second, much more substantive, crime. Poirot explains:

> The murder of Stephen Babbington was neither more nor less than a dress rehearsal. […] Sir Charles was an actor. He obeyed his actor's instinct. He tried out his murder before committing it. […] And, my friends, the dress rehearsal went well. Mr. Babbington dies, and foul play is not even suspected. […] In fact, he can be sure that, when the real performance comes, it will be 'all right on the night. *(TAT 330)*

Hence the “stageness” of the murder. Christie employs several theatre metaphors, otherwise much more typical for Marsh, in explaining the homicide. It is also one of her brilliant denouements – to commit a murder without any motive – only for the sake of murder itself. It is, once again, her successful way of “toying” with the reader; in this case, however, also the great detective is puzzled.

As suggested above, in the examined novels one can also find murders that combine theatricality with meta-narrative. Those are murders based on a certain scene in a play. In *Sleeping Murder*, one of the secondary roles is played by *The Duchess of
The well-known piece by Jacobean dramatist John Webster. The murderer here re-plays one of the final scenes, even using the exact words: “Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young. […] Her hair all golden and her face all, all blue. She was dead, strangled, and someone was saying those words in that same horrible gloating way” (SM 38-39). The performance and stageness of the murder puzzle Miss Marple until the very end of the story, as, at first, she thinks that the theatricality was meant to be connected to drama in general. “…if your father was the emotional type of killer, and was terribly in love with his wife and strangled her in a fit of frenzied jealousy – Othello fashion – (and that fits in with the words you heard)…,” (ibid 103) speculates Miss Marple, convincing herself, the other characters and the reader that her explanations are reasonable. She realizes only in the very last chapter that the choice of the words during the act of murder was not random – the murderer wanted to stage this particular murder scene because the lines and the whole plot of the tragedy were deeply connected to his family situation. Miss Marple remarks: “I was stupid – very stupid. We were all stupid. We should have seen at once. Those lines from The Duchess of Malfi were really the clue to the whole thing. They are said, are they not, by a brother who has just contrived his sister's death to avenge her marriage to the man she loved. Yes, we were stupid…” (ibid 297). As will be shown in the following, Webster’s play is one of the very few classical literary works that Christie involves in her novels.

4.2 Quoting

Quotations and allusions are integral components of detective stories. Shakespeare in particular is very popular among the whodunit writers, but also other authors are used or mentioned: Dickens, Poe, or Doyle above all. Some of the writers tend to quote heavily, and some choose to use the classic novels as a background, as an
advising aid for the sleuth, or for providing the reader with an example or an explanation. According to Bargainnier,

Christie makes no claims to erudition by filling her books with quotations from or references to esoteric literature. Nor does she use allusions as significant clues, with the single exception of John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Sleeping Murder*. Her attitude seems to have been that in the game of solving the mystery, she should not require any kind of special knowledge of her readers […]. When she does make allusions, they are never obscure – and always English. *(GAoM 168)*

To this remark probably one more example of a play used as a clue should be added – *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case*:

There was a copy of one of Shakespeare's plays, *Othello*, in a small cheap edition. The other book was the play *John Ferguson* by St. John Ervine. There was a marker in it at the third act.

I stared at the two books blankly. Here were the clues that Poirot had left for me - and they meant nothing to me at all!

What could they mean?

The only thing I could think of was a code of some kind. A word code based on the plays. (105)

As Poirot explains later in his letter, in both the plays there are characters that inspire others to kill someone. Their connection to the mysterious “X”, who has a finger in at
least five murders, is then self-evident. Christie also quotes Shakespeare in this novel, mentions *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Hamlet*, and, in fact, literally murders one of the characters with the book of *Othello*. Her intention here is very possibly to amaze the reader doubly, since there are two most unlikely killers – Poirot and Hastings; and both the crimes (intentional or not) are related to the character of Iago.

Marsh uses quotations more often than Christie, but this is caused by her professional passion for theatre. One cannot possibly set a plot in the theatre without occasional usage of Shakespeare’s lines. Sometimes the reader can find quotes without any reference, and he/she can then only assume that these are from Elizabethan or Jacobean drama. For example, “*How long will a man lie i’ the earth ere he rot?*”, a line from *Hamlet* pronounced by Perry Jay (*KD* 17). In this particular novel Jay’s thoughts are very often formed as Shakespearean lines, without any footnote information provided. Although Alleyn uses quotes and allusions very rarely, he is always able to decipher them. “Alleyn’s Shakespeareanism is obviously the result of Marsh’s career as a director of ten of Shakespeare’s plays, but, though at times the quoting may seem excessive, it is largely justified by his Oxford education and his general intellectuality.” (Bargainnier, *10WoM*, 86) Her purpose here is clear: to make Alleyn more knowledgeable than other police officers and the reader.

4.3 “They Do It Like This”

The characters in whodunits often try to match the inspector’s knowledge and abilities, usually by means of references to various detective stories. They, in fact, put themselves into the position of the reader, who should be able to recognize and also create allusions to previous, fictional or non-fictional, criminal cases. As demonstrated in the first chapter on the example of Sayers’s Harriet Vane, this phenomenon is very
popular among the authors – it usually serves them as a way of ridiculing themselves. While Christie uses her amusing character of Ariadne Oliver for these purposes, Marsh lets various Alleyn’s “helpers” make the general remarks about detective fiction. Her intention is not only to ridicule herself, but also to point at the inferiority of other characters, as compared to her great sleuth. It is one of Alleyn’s tasks to controvert these seemingly undeniable truths about detecting. The characters usually either expect Alleyn to behave according to these rules, or they use them as aids in their own efforts as amateur detectives. In both cases they never mention a particular whodunit (as, for example, Christie does in The Body in the Library), they only make general observations.

The characters almost never fail to note that Alleyn does neither look nor behave like a typical police officer – his first impression is therefore always accompanied with surprise: “Perhaps it is The Thing Done in the Yard,” answer Nigel; “though, I must say, he doesn't conform to my mental pictures of a sleuth-hound. I had an idea they lived privately amidst inlaid linoleums, aspidistras, and enlarged photographs of constabulary groups.” (AMLD 113) Nigel is one of the few, if not the only, characters that are allowed to ridicule Alleyn – in this he is slightly different from other “Watsonian” characters, particularly inspector Fox. However, even Alleyn himself proves to know detective literature, and uses his remarks either to ridicule himself or others: “Every sleuth ought to have a tame half-wit, to make him feel clever. I offer you the job, Mr. Bathgate--no salary, but a percentage of the honour and glory.” (ibid 91-92), or, “That I am not going to tell you. Oh, believe me, Bathgate, not out of any desire to figure as the mysterious omnipotent detective.” (ibid 140)

On the other hand, he does not approve of anyone relying too much on the information in novels, as well as he does not support the idea of other characters playing the role of amateur detectives. Therefore, when, for example, Fenella and Paul in Final
Curtain decide to decipher the clues before the police arrive, he only observes that “books about C.I.D. men will tell you that running a murderer to earth is just a job to us…” (FC 165). He is also similarly “amused” when Thomas Ancred asks him if he knows who committed the crime:

“It would be against one of our most stringent rules for me to name a suspect to an interested person when the case is still incomplete.”

“Well, couldn't you behave like they do in books? Give me a pointer or two? [...] When I read the script of a murder play I always know who did it.” (FC 194)

A special example of this kind of meta-narrativeness can be found in Vintage Murder where the reader learns about Alleyn’s own book on a detective’s work. “We’ve all been trained on your book. [Principles and Practices of Criminal Investigation, by Roderick Alleyn, M.A. (Oxon), C.I.D. (Sable & Murgatroyd, 21s.)] It’s—it’s a great honour to meet the author,” (62) says one of the police officers in New Zealand. As the reader can see here, Marsh provides full publication data, as if the book trully existed. It is not surprising that the police officers then expect Alleyn to behave accordingly, and it is self-evident that he is not, again, amused by this fact.

“I’ve just been reading your views on conjecture, sir,” said Wade.

“For the Lord’s sake, Wade, don’t bring my own burblings up against me, or I shall look the most unutterable ass. Conjecture or not, I think you’ll find traces of this performance if you look round up here.” (VM 66)
It is apparent from all the examples that the sleuth has to confront these situations on everyday basis. It is his job then to disprove the feeling that, after reading several whodunits, anyone can become a detective. Scenes like these also very possibly serve as a warning to the reader whose reason for reading detective stories has the same basis – to act as an amateur detective, and guess the murderer before the sleuth does. By making the characters’ efforts unsuccessful, the author also wins over the reader, proving him/her that no one can be as intelligent as her main inspector.

4.4 Ariadne Oliver

The meta-narrativeness and the conviction that one can do the detective work is even worse when an author of whodunits is present in the plot. These characters are convinced that there is, in fact, no difference between the real and the fictional worlds; and, if they can solve a mystery on paper, why not in reality? Christie’s original character Ariadne Oliver is one of the best examples. Mrs. Oliver appears in seven of Christies novels: Cards on the Table, Mrs McGinty’s Dead, Dead Man’s Folly, The Pale Horse, Third Girl, Halloween Party, and Elephants Can Remember, and she always somehow contributes not only to the humorousness of the plot, but, above all, to the investigation. Her relying on her “feminine intuition”, as she calls it, might often confuse the police officers; some of her steps and interpretations, however, lead to the netting of the culprit.

Bargainnier describes her as

“a prolific writer of sensational detective fiction, who provides Christie with the dual opportunity for self-satire and for critical comment on her genre. In her role as Poirot’s friend, she is a comic, at times absurd, foil,
who amuses him by her appearance, manner, and uncontrolled imagination.” (*GAoM* 57)

While reading Christie’s autobiography, or articles and interviews, one realizes that Ariadne Oliver is, in fact, Agatha Christie. She creates a foreign detective whom she begins to hate after several decades of writing, she does not like popularity and people telling her how much they like her books, and she is against any kind of gatherings and speeches, above all. It would be useful here to present a comparison between Christie’s attitudes to Poirot, and Oliver’s to Hjerson, to make the similarities more visible:

There are moments when I have felt: “Why-Why-Why did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature? … eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustache, and tilting his egg-shaped head…” Anyway, what is an egg-shaped head? […] In moments of irritation, I point out that by a few strokes of the pen…I could destroy him utterly. He replies, grandiloquently: “Impossible to get rid of Poirot like that! He is much too clever.” (qtd in *GAoM* 45)

“How do I know why I ever thought of the revolting man? I must have been mad! Why a Finn when I know nothing about Finland? Why a vegetarian? Why all the idiotic mannerisms he's got? These things just happen. You try something - and people seem to like it - and then you go on - and before you know where you are, you've got someone like that maddening Sven Hjerson tied to you for life. And people even write and say how fond you must be of him. Fond of him? If I met that bony,
gangling, vegetable-eating Finn in real life, I'd do a better murder than any I've ever invented.” (*MMD 201*)

*Mrs. McGinty’s Dead* offers a large number of these examples, which are undeniable allusions to Christie’s own problems (“He’s sixty. [...] I've been writing books about him for thirty years, and he was at least thirty-five in the first one.” – 162).

Apart from being critical, Ariadne Oliver, similarly to Sayers’s Harriet Vane, ridicules her own profession by trying to solve the crimes with the knowledge of her own narratives. The purpose of these scenes is clearly two-fold: to entertain the reader, and to identify with the reader. One of the best examples can be found in *Dead Man’s Folly*. Probably the most comic moments are caused by her intuition (“Now, don't laugh at my woman's intuition. Haven't I always spotted the murderer right away?” Poirot was gallantly silent. Otherwise he might have replied, “At the fifth attempt, perhaps, and not always then!” – *DMF 7*). The scene where she is naming all the possible reasons and scenarios of the murder, and by this completely confusing the inspector, is simply hillarious. Her list of suspects, clues and murder weapons (“a small pistol, a piece of lead piping with a rusty sinister stain on it, a blue bottle labelled Poison, a length of clothes line and a hypodermic syringe” – ibid 28) ridicules the popular criminal short stories where the murderer is usually the gardener or the butler: “The blackmailing letter form the housekeeper – or maybe from the butler. This butler looked as though blackmailing letters would be well within his scope.” (ibid 40-41).

For Christie, this character was an escape from the world of fiction, and a way of challenging her own writing. She was in a constant duel with herself where either of the sides was unable to win, since the narratives were no longer her own – they belonged to the readers. Therefore, one might say, that the puppetry, mentioned in the previous
chapter, was, in fact, not unidirectional – in certain ways the author is cornered by her own writing, and necessarily must become a puppet in the hands of the reader.

4.5 Playing Detectives and Villains

As stated several times throughout this paper, detective fiction is a game. Although it is above all an “intellectual game between the author and the reader” (GAoM 8), it is still a game, nonetheless. But what happens if the “playing” on paper becomes more active? It seems that since the 1920s/30s the idea of pretending to be gangsters and policemen has also joined the adult world. It was not unusual for parties to play various kinds of murder games at the time of Christie’s and Marsh’s novels, and this phenomenon has even lasted until today. For example, some American hotels or small theatres offer what they call “Detective Dinner Theatre” for a limited number of spectators who all participate in the performance, are present at the crime scene (which is usually a large dinner table, or several tables), and become either suspects or investigators. Also various shops often offer different kinds of active board games (very popular are those called “Inspector McClue”) that work on a similar basis, only are played at home.

It is not surprising then, that both Christie and Marsh use the popularity of these games in their plots. They can be found in A Man Lay Dead and Dead Man’s Folly, some traces of them are also present in A Murder is Announced. Before proceeding any further, it would be probably wise to explain the rules of these games. In Dead Man’s Folly Ariadne Oliver creates a “Murder Hunt” as a part of a village festival. She plants various (even misleading) clues which every competitor is supposed to find and note down. The aim of this game is not to discover the culprit but to find the victim. Therefore, it, more or less, follows the model of a treasure hunt, only, instead of a
treasure, the winner should find a corpse in the end. In *A Man Lay Dead* the rules of the game, invented by Sir Hubert, are as follows: at dinner one of the party guests would get a counter from a butler, and would have to play the murderer. His or her task would be to kill someone by tapping him on his shoulder and saying “You are the corpse.”, to switch off the lights for two minutes (in order to confuse the others), and to ring a gong to announce the murder. The investigation and tribunal would then follow, with questioning all the suspects and witnesses, and the murderer would be discovered. It is self-evident that in both cases the games end with real homicides, not fake ones.

The games provide the murderer with a fine opportunity for a simple crime which makes the following investigation very difficult. The festival suggests dozens of possible suspects, and, since the victim and the murder weapon had already been arranged at the crime scene by Mrs. Oliver, there are no real clues, and, therefore, Poirot remains truly puzzled almost until the very end of the novel. As Bargainnier explains: “The possibilities tumble out, and the truth is hidden in the mass.” (*GAoM* 59)

The irony of the murder game in *A Man Lay Dead* is that the real murderer has been inadvertently chosen by the butler to commit the crime. This fact helps him, as no one would expect that the person with the counter is “the one”. He is even clever enough to use the rules of the game to multiply his alibi: after he commits the real murder, he goes, taps Sir Hubert on his shoulder and says “You are the corpse.” (alibi no. 1 – why would he do that when he has already killed someone else?); he makes a passionate confession in the middle of the story (alibi no. 2 – the real murderer almost never does that); he was seen and heard taking a bath at the time of the murder (alibi no. 3 – it seems to be physically impossible). He, however, does not expect Alleyn to take part in the game.
“I think the Murder Game should be played out. I propose that we hold the trial precisely as it was planned. I shall play the part of prosecuting attorney. I'm not very good at official language, but I'll do my poor best. For the moment there will be no judge. That will be the only difference between this and the original version.” (AMLD 49)

As already mentioned in this paper, Alleyn is in his investigation more active than Poirot – in this case Alleyn’s participation in the game leads to a relatively quick solution of the crime, while Poirot has to engage his “little grey cells” for several months. In the language of the puppetry, Alleyn takes control of the strings and turns the murderer into another of his puppets during the final re-play of the game. By this the murderer looses all the trumps (or, in this case, the counters) hidden in his sleeves, and, with that, the whole game.

* A Murder Is Announced offers a special type of a homicide which combines a murder game with a staged crime. When “a murder is announced” in *Chipping Cleghorn Gazette*, the characters consider it to be an indirect invitation to a party with a certain murder game. The reader then receives two explanations of the rules which are rather similar to those in *A Man Lay Dead*.

“This can be very good fun if it's well done. But it needs good organising by someone who knows the ropes. You draw lots. One person's the murderer, nobody knows who. Lights out. Murderer chooses his victim. The victim has to count twenty before he screams. Then the person who's chosen to be the detective takes charge. Questions everybody. Where they were, what they were doing, tries to trip the real fellow up.
Yes, it's a good game – if the detective – er – knows something about police work.” (*AMLA* 11-12)

The intention of the murderess is not, however, to organize a game, but to gather witnesses/spectators for a “murder performance”. She pays a man to aim a gun at her, and, therefore, creates a certain kind of staged crime. The lights go off, like in the real game, nevertheless, the “game” has an unexpected denouement. Christie nicely manages to confuse both the characters (including Miss Marple) and the reader, by letting the fake gangster die. Only, as the story progresses, everyone realizes that the scene was more of a theatre rather than a game.

The murder game in all the novels inspected serves several purposes. One of them is the “misdirection [where] the reader is led to look at all circumstances the wrong way around.” (*GAoM* 123) However, Susan Rowland also suggests that “by portraying detecting as a self-consciously fictional ‘game’, golden age writers both democratise the form in promoting reader participation, and, crucially, permit a self-critical depiction of social class embedded in the genre.” (39)
CONCLUSION

This thesis covered several topics which might be divided into five categories: inspiration, theatre, acting, playing, and meta-narrative.

It is clear that both Marsh and Christie might have been influenced by an older generation of mystery writers, and also served as an inspiration to their followers. The examples demonstrated, that the theatrical and meta-narrative characters were created long before the famous Golden Age of an English whodunit. Wilkie Collins’s *Mr Wray's Cash Box* introduces a character of an actor that combines most of the characteristics later possessed by Marsh’s theatre personnel. He pretends to be a great actor and for that purpose quotes Shakespeare heavily (exactly like Marsh’s doorkeepers); his admiration for the leading actor, and his efforts to befriend him are mirrored in Marsh’s dressers. Collins also invented the so called “dramatic novels”, later developed by Edgar Wallace, and through him, employed by other detective fiction writers. Not only are some of Marsh’s and Christie’s novels structured as a script, divided into acts, using dramatis personae, or titling their chapters as introductory notes traditionally opening a scene in a theatre (Christie’s *Three Act Tragedy*, and, except for *A Man Lay Dead*, all Marsh’s novels examined here), they also employ the entrance and exit exclamations pointed out by Wallace. These are used mostly by Poirot who tends to boast about himself when uttering them, or Fox and Mrs. Oliver who are usually surprised by an appearance of a new clue, or by a turn in an investigation.

Apart from Collins and Wallace, one of the inspirations, particularly for Christie, might have been Dorothy L. Sayers who invented the character of Harriet Vane, very similar to Ariadne Oliver. Both of these characters are convinced that, thanks to their experience with detective fiction, they are able to solve a crime (which, not surprisingly, is not the case), they tend to use their plots for investigative purposes (Sayers’s *Have
His Carcase, Christie’s Third Girl), and, first and foremost, they serve as means of self-
satire for the authors. Since Christie does not mention Harriet Vane as an inspiration for
Mrs. Oliver either in any of her interviews or in her autobiography, it would be perhaps
wise to consider Ariadne rather as a representative of Christie’s own life experience.
They both share the disgust for their sleuths, the phobia of public speeches, or the
dissatisfaction with theatre adaptations of their novels.

Marsh took inspiration from her experience as well. After spending most of her
life in the theatre world, first as an actress and later as a director, it is no wonder that she
included her knowledge in her writing. The theatre provided her with various
possibilities for murders or depictions of character types. Her knowledge of props and
sets leads to innovative crimes in which she employs all parts of the stage. Vintage
Murder, no matter how foreseeable, demands certain technical skills and knowledge of
the fly loft and its technicalities – the amount of information about the length of the
strings or the size of the weights is truly impressive. Also the descriptions of the
backstage (used by Christie as well in They Do It with Mirrors) are vast and, in Marsh’s
case, also emotional, and contribute not only to the plot or the possibilities of the crime
and investigation, but also to the general picture the reader can make about the theatre.

The managers, directors, property masters and gatekeepers are depicted with
precision and detail. Marsh’s experience with impresarios must have been rather bad
since she portrays them quite negatively (the most unsympathetic ones appear in Enter a
Murderer, and Vintage Murder), and she usually assigns them the roles of either
murderers or victims. There is only one director the reader can find reappearing in
several of Marsh’s novels – Peregrine Jay. It is probable that while Christie put her own
personality into the character of Ariadne Oliver, Marsh impersonated herself in Perry
Jay. No one can blame her then for making him a very helpful and sensible character,
ever suspected by the police.
One of the greatest merits of Marsh’s theatrical whodunits is the possibility of “murder live”, committed during the performance, with Alleyn sitting in the auditorium. It is such an ingenious idea that it was later used, for example, by Michael Innes or Caroline Graham. It adheres to the rule “There is a darkness under the lamp.”, and Marsh counts on the fact that the reader would not expect the obvious suspect to be the culprit (as it is precisely the case of Felix Gardener in Enter a Murderer).

Among other phenomena in the world of theatre is the strange behaviour of actors and actresses. Their acting is either pretended or not, and most of the obstacles of an investigation are based on this assumption. The emotions are usually real as far as the superstitions are concerned. The “Curse of Macbeth” is probably the one with the longest history. It is forbidden for any theatre actor to quote Macbeth both inside and outside the theatre. If someone violates the rule, he or she not only spoils good mood in the pub (as Angus does in Light Thickens), but also must be prepared to face terrible consequences. Christie employs another fatal superstition in Lord Edgware Dies: the unlucky thirteen. Either of these superstitions provide with a nice opportunity for an inevitable murder. In any other situation, however, the truthfulness of actors is difficult to judge. Ordinary police officers, such as Inspector Japp in Lord Edgware Dies, are usually in the same dark as the reader, and it seems that only Alleyn is able to successfully lift the actors’ and actresses’ masks. The acting is part of a battle of wits between the murderer and the detective, and the author and the reader – it is one of the types of puppetry.

Being a good judge of people’s characters, Alleyn can then fulfil his role of a puppeteer in the detective puppet show. His mastery in “pulling the strings” is best demonstrated on his typical reconstructions of the crime scenes. Here he employs a more active method than Poirot or Miss Marple – while their final scene is more or less a monologue, Alleyn makes all the suspects and witnesses replay the whole murder. The
true culprit is usually so confused that, in the end, he unintentionally reveals himself, as Gardener in *Enter a Murderer*, or Wilde in *A Man Lay Dead* do.

One of the most important parts of the puppetry is the game between the author and the reader where the latter must inevitably lose since he/she will always possess less information about the characters, the clues and the plot, than the author. The third kind of a puppeteer is the murderer who is often able to control the strings by means of a staged crime scene. It is one of the most usual examples of a red herring – the body is planted in a strange place or position to either deceive the detective (the dead dancer in *The Body in the Library*), or to convey certain meaning (Wargrave’s costume in *Ten Little Niggers*).

Another kind of staged murder is a crime based on a piece of fiction. In *Sleeping Murder* the perpetrator strangulates his sister in the same way as it is done in Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*, even quoting the same lines during his crime. The criminal in *Poirot’s Last Case* is very similar in character to Iago. These are considered as examples of meta-narrative, or, as this thesis calls it, a “meta-whodunit”. The meta-narrative also covers remarks referring to some other whodunits (an activity which Alleyn utterly disapproves of), or the characters of writers. Ariadne Oliver is one of the best and most amusing examples of a meta-whodunit, and her main purpose is to generally ridicule detective fiction writers. The last type of a meta-whodunit that is used by both Christie and Marsh is a “murder game”. One can find two kinds of these games in their novels: a party game (*A Man Lay Dead, A Murder Is Announced*), and a public murder hunt (*Dead Man’s Folly*). These games provide the murderer with a fine opportunity to hide himself among the other players.

This paper tried to demonstrate that various aspects of theatricality and meta-theatricality permeate throughout the whole history of detective fiction. They reached their peak during the so called Golden Age, particularly in the novels and stories by
Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh. Although not all of the novels examined here belong to the inter-war period, they bear almost no traces of the new waves of crime fiction established in the second half of the 20th century. They remain faithful to the traditional patterns, drama, theatricality, and game qualities of a classic whodunit, and are therefore rightfully called the “English Queens of Crime”.
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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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This thesis concentrates on theatrical and meta-narrative elements in whodunits by two Queens of Crime – Agatha Christie and Ngaio Marsh. My intention is mainly to point out the impact these elements have on the plot, i.e. the development of the characters and the investigation, and the reader’s perception of the story.

While Marsh deals more with the topic of the theatre – her whodunits usually describe the behaviour of actors both on and offstage, the functions of props and sets, and the roles of technicians, stage managers, gatekeepers, or directors – Christie concentrates on the meta-narrativeness, particularly by means of her original character Ariadne Oliver. This comical figure enables her to ridicule not only herself but also detective fiction in general. Marsh uses her main sleuth, Roderick Alleyn, and his remarks about the usefulness of whodunits, for these purposes.

One of the main fields of my interest in this paper is the motif of deceit. Both Christie and Marsh introduce actors into the plots, since they are well aware of the fact that these people tend to act (or overact) even outside the theatre, and therefore both the investigator and the reader can never be fully certain what is yet real and what is already a mask. Another kind of a deceit is the so called staged crime scene where the murderer intentionally plants the body in an unusual position and place, often also using several red herrings.

The theatricality and the deceit contribute to the fact that a detective story is, in fact, a puppet show. But not only the murderer is the puppeteer – throughout the investigation it is usually the detective (be it Alleyn, Poirot, or Miss Marple) who starts “pulling the strings”, and the culprit becomes therefore only another puppet. The main puppeteer is, however, the author herself who plays with the reader. When he or she opens the book, they are drawn into a certain battle of wits, which they are able to win only very rarely. All these facts mirror in this thesis in many ways and at many places.
Tato práce se zabývá divadelními a metanarativními prvky v detektivkách dvou královen klasického zločinu – Agathy Christie a Ngaio Marsh. Mým záměrem je především poukázat na způsob, jakým tyto prvky ovlivňují děj, tzn. vývoj postav i vyšetřování, a čtenářovo vnímání příběhu.

Zatímco Ngaio Marsh se věnuje více tématu divadelnímu – její detektivní příběhy často popisují chování herců na scéně i v zákulisí, jednotlivé funkce rekvizit, či práci divadelních techniků, manažerů, vrátných a režiséřů – Agatha Christie se zaměřuje na metanarativnost, a to především postavou své oblíbené spisovatelky Ariadne Oliverové. Tato komická figurka jí umožňuje zesměšňovat sebe samu, stejně jako detektivní literaturu všeobecně. Marsh obyčejně k tomuto účelu využívá svého hlavního detektiva, Rodericka Alleyna, a jeho poznámky směrem k užitečnosti detektivní fikce.

Jednou z hlavních oblastí, na kterou se ve své práci zaměřuji, je motiv klamu. Obě autorky uvádějí do děje postavy herců, jelikož jsou si vědomy toho, že herci mají obvykle tendenci hrát (či přímo přehrávat) i mimo divadlo, a tudíž jak vyšetřovatel tak čtenář jsou neustále na vážkách, co je ještě skutečnost, a co už pouhá přetvářka. Jiným druhem klamu je pak tzv. zinscenované místo činu, kdy vrah úmyslně nastraží tělo neobvyklým způsobem, případně za použití několika falešných stop.