

## CHAPTER TWO

# NGAIO MARSH'S INNOCENT VICARAGE: CHARACTER, RELIGION AND PERFORMANCE IN *OVERTURE TO DEATH*

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Ngaio Marsh and her detective fiction is certainly less evident a topic in the context of “Christianity and the Detective Story”<sup>1</sup> than, e.g., G. K. Chesterton’s *Father Brown* stories and novels by Dorothy Sayers or even Agatha Christie. When critics consider Marsh’s work in this context at all, they usually refer to the representation of sects and cults in her writing, for instance, in her novels *Death in Ecstasy* (1936) and *Spinsters in Jeopardy* (1953), which revolve around the crimes committed by the leaders of the sects and around murders occurring among their members.<sup>2</sup> The attempt to hush up crime by surrounding it with an order of ritual is emphasised as these murders occur in a context of the misuse of religion.

There is, however, a very sincere representation of religion and belief in Marsh’s novel *Overture to Death*, first published in 1939, mainly in the figure of Father Copeland. He is one of the few characters in the novel who is neither guilty nor selfish. Indeed, the plot is based on the distinction between those characters who are sincere in their belief and those who misuse and only stage it. Marsh herself took both religion and the theatre very seriously,<sup>3</sup> but, apparently, she did not want them intermingled or combined. This leads to a divide in *Overture to Death* between the characters around Father Copeland, who are sincere, likeable, and innocent, and those around Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice, who are not.

The action of the novel focuses on a theatrical production that is to take place at the parish hall. On the evening of the performance, the woman who plays the overture is killed, and during the subsequent investigation led by Inspector Roderick Alleyn, the victim as well as her friend (who turns out to be the murderer) are exposed as characters who

feign to be religious so that they can flirt with the rector.<sup>4</sup> Marsh thus uses concepts of belief and doctrine to characterise the cast of her novel and thereby introduces a distinction between the theatre and the church. It appears that she uses the genre of detective fiction with its inherent “dialectic of innocence and guilt”<sup>5</sup> to unmask the superficiality of those who turn out to be guilty<sup>6</sup> and to emphasize the sincerity of those who are innocent. She does so, it would seem, not to accept or take for granted the objective truth of sincere religious belief, but instead to flesh out Auden’s hypothesized dialectic in her fiction—however, this aim is pursued with a twist since in *Overture to Death*, the vicarage turns out to be innocent after all.

### Religion in *Overture to Death*

A few people living in the village of Chipping decide to stage a play for charity (Jacob Hunt’s *Shop Windows*) at the parish hall of Winton St. Giles. They include the family of Jocelyn Jernigham, i.e. himself, his son Henry, and his cousin Eleanor Prentice; Father Copeland, the rector, and Dinah, his daughter, who is an actress; Dr. Templett and Selia Ross, with whom he secretly has an affair; as well as Idris Campanula. On the evening of the performance, a slight change occurs in the setup: after having quarrelled with Idris Campanula about who is to play the overture for weeks and finally being the chosen player, Eleanor Prentice suddenly has to step back from her engagement because of a wounded finger. She hands over the task to Idris Campanula, who then, as always, plays Rachmaninoff’s “Prelude in C Sharp Minor”<sup>7</sup>:

She leant forward until her nose was within three inches of the music, and she held her left hand poised over the bass. Down it came.

Pom. Pom. POM.

The three familiar pretentious chords.

Miss Campanula paused, lifted her big left foot and planked it down on the soft pedal.

The air was blown into splinters of atrocious clamour. . . . Miss Campanula fell forward. Her face slid down the sheet of music, which stuck to it. Very slowly and stealthily she slipped sideways to the keys of the piano, striking a final discord in the bass. She remained there, quite still, in a posture that seemed to parody the antics of an affected virtuoso. She was dead.<sup>8</sup>

Miss Campanula, it turns out eventually, was shot by a pistol that had been placed in the piano and would fire as soon as the soft pedal was touched;

and the murderer knew it would, since Idris Campanula always played the same piece of music.

When detective Roderick Alleyn arrives at the scene of crime, he is first confronted with the problem that he cannot be entirely sure if Miss Campanula was the intended victim or rather Eleanor Prentice, who was originally supposed to play the piano. He eventually finds out that it was Eleanor Prentice who committed the murder out of jealousy and because of her infatuation with the rector of the village: she had intentionally hurt her finger and then acted her role of reluctantly giving up the playing of the overture, while she had been planning the murder all along.

In terms of W. H. Auden's definition in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage," Idris Campanula fulfils all the necessary criteria of a "satisfactory victim"<sup>9</sup>: she has to be a "bad character" so that everyone can be involved in suspicion because, theoretically, everyone could have a motive for murder. At the same time everyone also has to feel guilty about the death of the victim, "which requires that [she] be a good character,"<sup>10</sup> i.e., she has to evoke some sort of compassion. Miss Campanula was a lonely spinster, which may evoke pity, but she was also not a very agreeable person; she was friends with Eleanor Prentice, but their alliance was "based on mutual antipathies and interests"<sup>11</sup> rather than on true friendship: "Each adored scandal and each cloaked her passion in a mantle of conscious rectitude."<sup>12</sup> Eleanor Prentice is characterized as "a thin, colourless woman of perhaps forty-nine years" who "disseminate[s] the odour of sanctity"<sup>13</sup> and "never relinquishe[s] her air of charity."<sup>14</sup> This rather unflattering introduction of the two women already hints at their playing roles: they "cloak" their feelings and carry an "air," which means that they do not show their real character but try to disguise it. Their unfavourable presentation is brought to a climax when the rector speaks about them: "I wish she [Miss Campanula] wouldn't confess. I wish that I didn't get the impression that she and Miss Prentice merely use the confessional as a means of informing against each other."<sup>15</sup> The two women's outward religiousness is uncovered as a show but also as a kind of weapon in their rather desperate fight for the rector's attention and, possibly, also his affection; they do not take confession seriously, but they use it for gossip, slander and defamation. They stage their spirituality.

When Alleyn first questions Eleanor Prentice about the murder, she even takes refuge in her religious views and says "I believe . . . that our greatest succour lies in prayer,"<sup>16</sup> by which, evidently, she trivializes a phrase from devotional prose, for instance, the notion of succour in the *Book of Common Prayer*: "of whom may we seek for succour, but of thee, O Lord."<sup>17</sup> Considering the fact that she is the murderer, her religious

statements and avowals show that she does not really take religion seriously but that she (mis)uses religion to compensate for some lack.<sup>18</sup> Her sanctimoniousness contributes to the unpleasantness of her character, which is confirmed by means of narratorial and figural comments about her throughout the novel. It is somehow surprising that both murderer and victim are so obviously unpleasant: Marsh thus gets rid of two unsavoury characters, which might be regarded as an act of expurgation.

The representations of Father Copeland as well as of his daughter Dinah and her lover Henry Jernigham are the exact opposite. After the murder, part of Alleyn's investigation requires him to attend the church service. The following scene is transmitted entirely through his eyes:

Like everybody else who saw him for the first time, Alleyn was startled by the rector's looks. The service was a choral Eucharist and he wore a cope, a magnificent vestment that shone like a blazon in the candle light. His silver hair, the incredible perfection of his features, his extreme pallor, and great height, made Alleyn think of an actor admirably suited for the performance of priestly parts. But when the time came for the short sermon, he found evidence of a simple and unaffected mind with no great originality. It was an unpretentious sermon touched with sincerity. The rector spoke of prayers for the dead and told his listeners that there was nothing in the teaching of their church that forbade such prayers. He invited them to petition God for the peace of all souls departed in haste or by violence, and he commended meditation and a searching of their own hearts lest they should harbour anger or resentment.<sup>19</sup>

Alleyn first thinks of Father Copeland in terms of staging, as of an actor in a performance—but this changes when the rector begins to speak. Then Alleyn recognizes that, even with or, rather, despite the magnificent attire and the ritual, Copeland does not put on a show; he is “simple,” “unaffected,” and “unpretentious.”<sup>20</sup> Alleyn's initial scepticism (which was, however, mitigated by some sympathy as he thought him “admirably suited”), is replaced with respect for Copeland's humility: this contrast in perception is essentially based on the juxtaposition of seeing and listening, i.e. the “show” and the “words.”<sup>21</sup> The rector's sincerity and authenticity are therefore opposed to the other characters' religious “shows.” Father Copeland fulfils George Herbert's requirements of a priest as put forward in the *Country Parson* with regard to his simplicity, humility and his “earnestness.”<sup>22</sup> This sincerity and earnestness contribute to the rector's being a likeable character, and there is a clear difference established between the character of Father Copeland and that of Eleanor Prentice in this respect.

A certain liking for (and sympathy with) a particular kind of behaviour, language and tone on behalf of both the narrator and Alleyn can also be observed with regard to the characters of Henry and Dinah. Henry Jernigham is in love with the rector's daughter. He wants to meet her secretly because Eleanor is spying on them, which is why they meet on a hill in the early morning. While Henry is waiting for Dinah, he thinks: "If she came! Please God, make it happen, said Henry's thoughts as they used to do when he was a little boy."<sup>23</sup> Henry certainly is a very modern, secular and rational character, but he also has an inherent belief, probably shaped in childhood, to which he returns in this situation, so that, in a very childlike manner, he prays for Dinah to come. His thoughts and feelings are genuine—as is his love for Dinah<sup>24</sup>—whereas the religious sentiment of the manic (and sexually obsessive) women like Idris Campanula and Eleanor Prentice are wholly premeditated and contrived.

Dinah has a character very similar to Henry's; she is "serious"<sup>25</sup> and what one might call "authentic." Whereas Eleanor Prentice has an "air of charity," Dinah's charity is genuine. It is, in fact, very directly contrasted with that of the two older women. After the group has decided on the play, the two older women are still in an uproar about the choice of play and the role Selia Ross had in it, as it was her suggestion to perform *Shop Windows*. Their dislike of Miss Ross is based on her supposed affair with the doctor, Mr. Templett. When they talk about this, Dinah cautions them that they cannot know about the affair for sure: "[W]e don't know there's anything more than friendship between them . . . And even if there is, it's their business."<sup>26</sup> The two women are scandalized at such behaviour and they remind Dinah of her role as "a priest's daughter," which Dinah counters: "As a priest's daughter . . . I've got a sort of idea charity is supposed to be a virtue."<sup>27</sup> It is the priest's daughter and the *actress* here who speaks sincerely and rebuffs the deceitful behaviour of the older women.

Accordingly, Alleyn's sympathies lie with the young couple; when he confronts Eleanor Prentice with his suspicion of her having committed the murder, he first sends them out of the room to protect them from the scene that is to come<sup>28</sup>: "The detectives tend to know what they like and whom they like. Although an immediate liking, an appeal, a charm, sometimes may play a part, it is usually a question of speaking a certain language and sharing a certain tone."<sup>29</sup> Alleyn shares this tone of a rational, slightly sceptical and secular attitude with them.<sup>30</sup> He consequently expresses his dislike of Eleanor Prentice's character in one of his letters to Troy<sup>31</sup>:

Miss Eleanor Prentice is . . . rather a horrid woman. She's quite colourless and she's got buck teeth. She disseminates an odour of sanctity. She smiles

a great deal, but with an air of forbearance as if hardly anything was really quite nice. I think she's a religious fanatic, heavily focused on the rector. This morning when I interviewed her she was thrown into a perfect fever by the sound of the church bells. She could scarcely listen to the simplest question, much less return a reasonable answer, so ardent and impatient was her longing to go to church. Now, in your true religious that's understandable enough. If you believe in the God Christ preached, you must be overwhelmed by your faith, and in time of trouble turn, with a heart of grace, to prayer. But I don't think Eleanor Prentice is that sort of religious. God knows I'm no psychoanalyst, but I imagine she'd be meat and drink to any one who was. Does one talk about a sex-fixation? Probably not.<sup>32</sup>

At the beginning, he repeats the narrator's statement about Miss Prentice of her "disseminating an odour of sanctity."<sup>33</sup> Alleyn, hence, does not believe her to be truly religious which, for him, means possessing genuine belief, not fanaticism, and honest feeling instead of exaggerated behaviour. True belief is connected with a feeling of being "overwhelmed" by the grace and faith that come from God and that do not need the air or odour of sanctity.

Alleyn is not a religious detective, let alone a cleric turned detective, and therefore rather different from Father Brown and his successors. During an earlier conversation with Father Copeland, Alleyn and he have a short debate about confession: "But Alleyn was not there for doctrinal argument, and wouldn't have welcomed it under any circumstances."<sup>34</sup> Alleyn is presented as someone who is able to appreciate and recognize not only sincerity but also religious mania in other characters. And, therefore, he can uncover the staging of religion by the murderess.

### The Staging of Religion

The staging of religion is a recurrent motif in Marsh's novels. The murder in *Overture to Death* not only takes place in a theatrical setting, but this theatricality also reflects the attitude of at least some of the characters: they act a role constantly.<sup>35</sup>

This may be one of the reasons why Alleyn first suspects Father Copeland of acting a role during service, and the figure of the play-acting spiritual role model does indeed appear in Ngaio Marsh's detective fiction, namely in the role of religious leader of a sect. This is, for example, the case in her novel *Death in Ecstasy*, which is set in the context of the sect of "The House of the Sacred Flame." During an initiation ceremony, a woman is killed, and, although the priest, Father Garnette, is not the

murderer, he is eventually uncovered to be a criminal as he embezzled part of his congregation's money and had an affair with the victim.

When Father Garnette first appears, he is described as

... an extremely tall man clad in embroidered white robes of a Druidical cut and flavour. He was of a remarkable appearance, having a great mane of silver hair, large sunken eyes and black brows. The bone of his face was much emphasized, the flesh heavily grooved. His mouth was abnormally wide with a heavy underlip. *It might have been the head of an actor, a saint, or a Middle-West American purveyor of patent medicines.*<sup>36</sup>

The enumeration of who or what he might possibly be tends towards the absurd: Father Garnette is a hodgepodge of all different kinds of "selves." This first introduction already implies that something is probably wrong with the father of "The House of the Sacred Flame."

The religious ceremony then performed resembles a theatrical performance. Father Garnette is described as a priest "who relies on staging,"<sup>37</sup> and the words "theatricality" and "performance" appear repeatedly in the course of events:

Indeed, the hall looked like nothing so much as an ultramodern art exhibition gone completely demented. From above the altar projected a long sconce holding the bronze torch from which the sanctuary flame rose in its naphtha-like theatricality.<sup>38</sup>

It was a nauseating, a detestable performance[.]<sup>39</sup>

After the murder, the journalist Nigel Bathgate, who later helps Alleyn with the investigation, goes forward and has "the sensation of walking on to a stage and joining in the action of the play."<sup>40</sup> It is important to note that Marsh describes not only the misuse of religion but also the misuse of the theatre in these passages and thus unmasks and exposes the lack of sincerity in Father Garnette's sect.

This becomes particularly evident when Father Garnette explains the ceremony of the House of the Sacred Flame to Alleyn:

In our ritual, Inspector Alleyn, the goblet itself is holy and blessed. By the very act of pouring in the wine, this too becomes sacred—sacred by contact with the Cup. Our ceremony of the Cup, though it embraces the virtues of various communions in Christian churches, is actually entirely different in essentials and in intention.

and the latter replies

“I was not,” said Alleyn coldly, “so mistaken as to suspect any affinity.”<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, it is evident how religious practices become empty and shallow when removed from their original contexts.<sup>42</sup> It also shows the misuse of the theatre: Alleyn cannot warm up to the (pseudo)religious practice as performed by Garnette, and he later even comments on the House of the Sacred Flame, “with great violence,” as “[d]amn’, sickly, pseudo, bogus, mumbo-jumbo.”<sup>43</sup> This simultaneously implies a clear statement in favour of Christian churches, which corresponds to the portrayal of Father Copeland in *Overture to Death*, and their sincerity in the practice of faith. The “ritual” and “performance” in *Death in Ecstasy* ends with the murder, and eventually, with the termination of the sect.<sup>44</sup>

Acting and the theatre thus is an issue in many of Marsh's novels, even when they are not about the actual performance of a play. This is also true for her later novel *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, in which the religious leader, Mr. Oberon, acts a role<sup>45</sup>: “What was startling and to Troy quite shocking, was the resemblance to Roman Catholic devotional prints such as the ‘Sacred Heart.’ She was to learn that this resemblance was deliberately cultivated. He wore a white dressing-gown to which his extraordinary appearance gave the air of a ceremonial robe.”<sup>46</sup> Troy's reaction is sympathy-steering<sup>47</sup>: she finds the misuse of religion “shocking.” Mr. Oberon is subsequently unmasked as an actor. He performs within his sect, which is described by Alleyn as “[a] synthetic religion *concocted* from scraps of mysticism, witchcraft, mythology, Hinduism, Egyptology, what-have-you, with . . . a number of particularly revolting fancy touches invented by Mr. Oberon,”<sup>48</sup> part of these being drugging women. Alleyn mainly criticises the predominant eclecticism and the deception practised here.<sup>49</sup>

When Alleyn eventually takes part in one of the ceremonies undercover, he witnesses the following:

Little spires of smoke began to rise from the five points of the star. The Egyptian had retired to a dark corner beyond the altar and presently began to strike a drum and play a meandering air on some reed instrument. To Alleyn the scene was preposterous and phony. . . . Even the ritual, for what it was worth, was bogus: a vamped up synthesis, he thought, of several magic formulae. . . . It was the blackest kind of affair . . . and entirely infamous. . . . Baradi began to pour out a stream of names. . . . The recurrent “Ra” was presently taken up by the initiates who began to bark it out with an enthusiasm, Alleyn thought, only to be equalled by the organized cheers of an American ball game. . . . [W]ith the appearance of Oberon, naked, in the role of Ra or Horus, or both, the Rites took on the character of unbridled phallicism.<sup>50</sup>



The pseudo-religious ceremony is compared to an “American ball game,” dubbed as “organized,” “revolting,” “infamous” and “bogus,” and as a result stripped of its seeming seriousness. In the *Wisdom of Solomon*, such practice is represented as counterfeiting “true religion”<sup>51</sup>; it ends in “frenzied orgies, secret ceremonies, and ritual murder”<sup>52</sup>. “For the worshipping of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end, of all evil.”<sup>53</sup> Just like in Marsh’s *Death in Ecstasy*, the emphasis of the (pseudo-) religious ceremony lies on outward show rather than felt sincerity: one never learns definitely what is supposed to happen in the ceremony of the cult of the Children of the Sun, but at its centre are a young woman and a goat—the reader’s conjecture is that at least one shall be sacrificed. It is Alleyn who ultimately ends “evil” and saves the congregation from themselves, with the help of a very sincerely religious young man.

The House of the Sacred Flame and the Cult of the Children of the Sun are exposed as pseudo-religious cults that even use “drugs for phony religious purposes.”<sup>54</sup> Drug-dealing and cultish enthusiasm go hand in hand, and the faux-priests in these novels turn out to be criminals. Religion is thus being used as a means for an end that is quite different from its usual goal: it does not lead to salvation, but to utter ruin.

## Conclusion

In her autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, Marsh describes her father’s “anti-religious views”<sup>55</sup> during her youth and her own enjoyment of prayers at the parish church which turned into “religious fervour”<sup>56</sup> when she entered St. Margaret’s College<sup>57</sup>: “The fervour, the extremes and the uncertainties of adolescence must find some sort of channel. I took mine out in Anglo-Catholic observance;”<sup>58</sup> “I had become an ardent Anglo-Catholic.”<sup>59</sup>

As an adult writer, she distances herself from this attitude: “How illogical, how dogmatic, how comically arrogant, one musters, and how vulnerable! Perhaps the Roman Catholic Church is wise to offer its members for confirmation while they are still children and so avoid the complications of later transitional years.”<sup>60</sup> But although Marsh moved away from her earlier behaviour, she still does not question sincere religious belief. Her refutation is particularly directed at “pseudoreligious experience”<sup>61</sup> that does not conform to unaffectedness, humility and seriousness. Troy’s reaction to Mr. Oberon is quite telling in this respect: Marsh distinguishes between the true and the false when Troy is

emotionally *shocked* at the use of Roman Catholic features in the context of a sect.

Marsh's contempt for religious enthusiasm, or, worse, fanaticism, is expressed also as early as the first passage of *Death in Ecstasy*:

There are many strange places of worship in London, and many remarkable sects. The blank face of a Cockney Sunday masks a kind of activity, intermittent but intense. All sorts of queer little religious squeak, like mice in the wainscoting, behind its tedious façade. Perhaps these devotional side-shows satisfy in some measure the need for colour, self-expression and excitement in the otherwise drab lives of their devotees. They may supply a mild substitute for the orgies of a more robust age. No other explanation quite accounts for the extraordinary assortments of persons that may be found in their congregations.<sup>62</sup>

She regards religious sects as an expression of people's boredom and languor and distances herself from cults and their congregations: religious ceremony serves as a tool, a means of fulfilling desires that are not at all religious, which is very much in accordance with her novel *Overture to Death*. At the same time, she uses religion as writing material for her crime fiction and thereby seems even to reflect on the artificiality of the genre<sup>63</sup>: If one thinks again about the presentation of Father Copeland, one can see that Marsh introduces a kind of red herring in having Alleyn first see him as an actor but then as a sincere person, and it is this sincerity that distinguishes him from many of the other characters in the novel, which is why he cannot even be a suspect.<sup>64</sup> The very point, however, of including such a red herring—together with the examples of actor-priests in her other novels—allows for some reflection on the constructedness of the whodunit.

When Breen calls detective fiction “intrinsically the most moral kind,”<sup>65</sup> he refers to the “victory of good over evil.”<sup>66</sup> If morality is understood in the sense of norms and values, this concept can be broadened with regard to Ngaio Marsh's novels: she presents truly religious characters (that is, “good”) and contrasts them with those who make a show of religion (that is, “evil”). And those who are performers always turn out to be criminals as well. The vicarage in Marsh's *Overture to Death* is innocent, not guilty, because of the rector's sincerity and because of his truly Christian beliefs. Marsh seems to imply that religion as well as acting and the theatre have to be treated with the same sincerity and must not be misused for selfish purposes. By introducing these views into (at least some of) her detective stories, Ngaio Marsh draws on the genre's inherent dialectic of innocence and guilt.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a revised version of the paper "The Innocent Vicarage in Ngaio Marsh's Detective Stories: Roderick Alleyn and the *Overture to Death*," presented at the Northeast Conference on Christianity and Literature, "Christianity and Detective Fiction," Pace University, New York, from March 5 to 6, 2010.—I would like to thank Professor Matthias Bauer for his critical comments on this essay, and Lena Moltenbrey for helping me with formatting it.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Marvin Lachmann's essay "Religious Cults and the Mystery," *Synod of Sleuths: Essays on Judeo-Christian Detective Fiction*, ed. Jon L. Breen and Martin H. Greenberg (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1990), 79–109. There he mentions the religious cults practised in these novels (80–81).

<sup>3</sup> The theatre and theatrical productions feature in many of her novels, e.g., *Opening Night*, *Light Thickens*, *Enter a Murderer*, to name only a few examples. Ngaio Marsh was not only a writer of detective fiction but also a theatre director. For more details about this see her autobiography, *Black Beech and Honeydew* (London: HarperCollins, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the following passage: "Eleanor Prentice had a sort of coy bedside manner with the rector. She spoke to him in a dove-smooth voice and frequently uttered little musical laughs. Idris Campanula was bluff and proprietary, called him 'my

dear man' and watched him with an intensity that made him blink, and aroused in his daughter a conflicting fury of disgust and compassion"; Ngaio Marsh, *Overture to Death* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 20. All further quotations, if not otherwise indicated, refer to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 147.

<sup>6</sup> Charney writes that, in the detective novel, the "inauthentic is unmasked in all sorts of fields," even "in the Church." Hannah Charney, *The Detective Novel of Manners: Hedonism, Morality, and the Life of Reason* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 46.

<sup>7</sup> The name Campanula is a derivation of 'campanelli,' which means bells in Italian, and 'campanula,' a plant which translated means 'bell flower.' Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C Sharp Minor" is also known as the 'Bell Prelude'—it is therefore quite consistent that Miss Campanula would play the 'Bell Prelude.' I would like to thank my colleague Helen Gelinias for pointing this out to me. Names seem to be (at least partly) motivated in this novel: Dr. Templett's name is a diminutive of 'temple,' and Eleanor Prentice's name is derived from 'apprentice,' which is her self-conceived role in a religious context. The choice of names appears to be functional as it strengthens the religious undercurrent of the novel.

<sup>8</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 87–88.

<sup>9</sup> Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," 152.

<sup>10</sup> Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," 152.

<sup>11</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 29–30.

<sup>16</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 167.

<sup>17</sup> "At the Burial of the Dead," *The Book of Common Prayer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 332.

<sup>18</sup> On the relationship between psychiatry and religion around the time when Ngaio Marsh wrote this novel see, e.g., Lydia Ross, *Medical Psychology* (Point Loma, Calif.: Aryan Philosophical Press, 1916); Leon Milton Birkhead, *From Sin to Psychiatry, and Interview on the Way to Mental Health with Dr. Karl A. Menninger* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publications, c1931); Otto Rank, *Truth and Reality* (New York: Norton, 1936/1978); Harry Forest Haas, *How to Psychoanalyze the Bible* (Orangeburg, S.C.: Haas Publication Committee, c1939).

<sup>19</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 169. In the 1994 Harper Collins edition of the novel, this passage reads slightly differently: "But when the time came for the short sermon, he found evidence of a simple and unaffected mind with no great sincerity"; Ngaio Marsh, *Overture to Death* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 175. This change is only explicable as a type-setting blunder: almost a whole sentence—" [no great] originality. It was an unpretentious sermon touched with

[sincerity]”—is missing. But if Marsh had written that Father Copeland spoke with “no great sincerity,” her whole line of argument and the structure of the novel would actually fail to work. It is more than probable that somehow this part of the sentence got lost in the editing/printing process.

<sup>20</sup> Alleyn's change of mind is even reflected linguistically: while at first he thinks of the rector in rather pathetic and slightly exaggerated terms (“magnificent vestment that shone like a blazon,” “the incredible perfection,” “extreme pallor”), this changes to more uncomplicated expressions (“simple and unaffected,” “unpretentious”) whose simplicity actually illustrates what they are supposed to express concerning their referent. The linguistic variation mirrors Alleyn's perception that changes from the outer appearance to the real being.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Charney on the significance of linguistic style in detective fiction: “Written or spoken style is a crucial element in the portrait of many characters of detective fiction” (*Detective Novel of Manners*, 41).

<sup>22</sup> George Herbert, *The Country Parson and The Temple*, ed. and intr. John N. Wall, Jr. (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1981), 62.

<sup>23</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 58.

<sup>24</sup> See the following passage: “Three weeks earlier he had met her unexpectedly on the hills above Cloudyfoot, and with that encounter came love. He had felt as if he saw her for the first time. The bewildering rapture of discovery was still upon him. To meet her gaze, to speak to her, to stand near her, launched him upon a flood of bliss. . . .” Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 55.

<sup>28</sup> “Alleyn took a card from his pocket and scribbled on it. He handed it over to Henry. ‘Will you take Miss Dinah to the rectory?’ he said. ‘In half an hour I want you to ring through to here on the extension. Show this card to the man at the door and he will let you out’”; Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 305.

<sup>29</sup> Charney, *Detective Novel of Manners*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> This becomes particularly evident when he compares Henry and Dinah and their relationship to himself and Troy, which implies some amount of identification with them (cf. Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 257).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Erik Routley, *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story: A Personal Monograph* (London: Gollancz, 1972), who writes that Marsh “communicates so much of Alleyn's character through his conversation” (147).

<sup>32</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 256.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *OED* “odour” *n.* II.5: “a state of saintliness or moral rectitude; reputed virtuousness. Now chiefly *ironic and humorous*.”—This passage also contains a clear hint for the reader of Shakespeare as to who the murderer must be: when Alleyn writes “[s]he smiles a great deal,” this is an echo of Richard of Gloucester in *Henry VI*: “Why, I can smile, and murder whiles I smile”; William Shakespeare,

*Henry VI*, ed. John D. Cox and Eric Rasmussen (London: Thomson, 2001), 3.2.182.

<sup>34</sup> Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 195.

<sup>35</sup> As has been noted above, it is interesting that Marsh has the only real professional actress in the novel be an authentic character, who does not act a role in real life.

<sup>36</sup> Ngāio Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 17 (my emphasis). The word “Druidical” points at the neo-paganism in this novel, which can clearly be contrasted with the Anglican village priest. I would like to thank Helen Gelinias again for telling me that “patent medicine” is a misnomer (as the medicines were almost never “patented”) and thus a euphemism for self-styled home remedies that travelling preachers (or hawkers of products and religion) used to con people into buying in 19th century American frontier communities. The main ingredient was most likely snake-oil, or some other worthless element; i.e., they were tricksters or charlatans. Highly charismatic, they could get unsuspecting people to believe them, and thus could ‘sell’ them anything, chiefly, salvation or useless medicines. That is why the term “snake-oil salesman” is a synonym today in American English for charlatan; cf. *OED* “snake” *n.* 12.a., where the relation between snake-oil and quack medicine is explicitly pointed out. *Elmer Gantry* is a fictional character in the novel by Sinclair Lewis, *Elmer Gantry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983) who epitomized one of these phony preacher-types who used, abused and carelessly destroyed lives as he went along. Many of these pseudo-evangelists made the circuit in the Midwest (Kansas, Missouri, etc.), so Marsh’s term immediately conjures such rogues, implying the epitome of insincere purveyors of religion. It goes perfectly with the point of her story.

<sup>37</sup> Lachmann, “Religious Cults and Mystery,” 81.

<sup>38</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 55–57.

<sup>42</sup> This passage is full of scriptural references, especially to Matthew 23, where Jesus speaks to the hypocrite Pharisees (cf. the reference to “cup” in Mt 23:25–26). *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*, ed., intr. and notes Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The wine *should* represent the blood of Christ, but in this context everything is only part of some show and highly superficial, which is underlined by means of Garnette’s emphasis on the cup itself rather than its content. This contrast between outside and inside is also emphasised in Matthew 23:25.

<sup>43</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 57.

<sup>44</sup> In a symbolic act at the end of the novel, the sign pointing to the house of the sect is taken away (cf. Marsh, *Overture to Death*, 286).

<sup>45</sup> His name even alludes to the King of the Fairies in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

<sup>46</sup> Ngaio Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, in *Opening Night; Spinsters in Jeopardy; Scales of Justice; and The Hand in the Sand* (London: Harper, 2009), 205–448; 254. There are various paintings of *The Sacred Heart*; usually Jesus is depicted with long hair and a white robe.

<sup>47</sup> She later says to her husband: “Oberon’s obviously dishing out to his chums some fantastic hodgepodge of mysticism-cum-religion-cum, I’m very much afraid, eroticism.” Alleyn replies: “There is nothing so very unusual about the religio-erotic racket. Oberon’s name, by the way, is Albert George Clarkson. He’s a millionaire and undoubtedly one of the drug barons. The cult of the Children of the Sun in the Outer is merely a useful sideline”; Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, 265.— See also the description of the “chapel”: “[A]t one side is a raised place with a table like a holy altar, covered in a cloth which is woven in a rich pattern with gold and silver and jewels. But although one saw the holy cross, there were other things in the pattern that one does not see in altar cloths”; Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, 371, such as, e.g., the pentagram.

<sup>48</sup> Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, 294 (my emphasis).

<sup>49</sup> Cf. the connotation of “concoct” as a possible act of deception; *OED* “concoct, v.” III. 11: “To make up, devise, or plan by concert, or by artificial combination; to put together, make up, or fabricate (a story, project, fraud, etc.).”

<sup>50</sup> Marsh, *Spinsters in Jeopardy*, 429–33.

<sup>51</sup> William David Spencer, *Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel* (Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1989), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Spencer, *Mysterium and Mystery*, 2–3.

<sup>53</sup> Ws 14:27; *The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha*.

<sup>54</sup> Kathryn S. McDorman, “Ngaio Marsh and the ‘Drug Scene’ of Detective Fiction,” *The Languages of Addiction* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1999), 135–159; 145. According to McDorman, the novels therefore also serve as anti-drug statements by Marsh (145–49).

<sup>55</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 65.

<sup>60</sup> Marsh, *Black Beech and Honeydew*, 65. Routley characterises Marsh as an agnostic, and sees her attitude mirrored in Alleyn, “who has to admit that he is, in *Singing in the Shrouds* (1959)”; Routley, *Puritan Pleasures*, 148.

<sup>61</sup> McDorman, “Ngaio Marsh and the ‘Drug Scene,’” 140.

<sup>62</sup> Marsh, *Death in Ecstasy*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> I therefore hesitate to agree with views that follow the Marxist *Widerspiegelungstheorie*, such as Mandel, who regards crime stories as social documents “that mirror . . . society”; Doreen Alvarez Saar, “Writing Murder: Who is the Guilty Party?,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 31.3 (2008): 150–58; 152; and also P. D. James, who explained in an interview: “What’s interesting about the



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crime novel is it can explore all sorts of problems that worry people today and often does it more realistically. . . . [T]he crime novel can tell you more about the social mores and problems and complexities of the age"; Lewis Smith, "Crime masterminds should get their just deserts, say P. D. James and Ian Ranking," *The Times*, 14 Oct 2005,

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article1906500.ece> (accessed 12 Feb 2012). I rather sympathize with Hanna Charney's view who claims that the detective novel resembles the novel of manners; it shows us certain structures of society, but we are always aware of their being fictitious and artificial.

<sup>64</sup> At least according to W. H. Auden, who writes that "suspects must be guilty of something" (Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage," 153), but Father Copeland is not.

<sup>65</sup> Jon L. Breen, "Introduction," *Synod of Sleuths: Essays on Judeo-Christian Detective Fiction* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1990), v–viii; v.

<sup>66</sup> Breen, "Introduction," v.