



**49<sup>TH</sup> ANNUAL MEETING**  
Shakespeare Association of America

Gina Bloom, *University of California, Davis*  
Anna Stegh Camati, *Centro*  
*Universitário Campos Andrade*  
Rachel Chung, *University of Edinburgh*  
Elisabeth M. Dutton, *Université de Fribourg*  
Melinda Gough, *McMaster University*  
Erin Julian, *University of Roehampton*  
Sawyer K. Kemp, *University of*  
*Illinois, Urbana-Champaign*

**Seminar: Histories of the Early  
Modern Digital/Material Book**

**Leader: Erin A. McCarthy,**  
**University of Newcastle**  
Clara Biesel, *University of Minnesota*  
Kevin Chovanec, *Christian*  
*Brothers University*  
Mark C. Hulse, *Lansing, MI*  
Emily E. Rendek, *University of South Carolina*

**Seminar: Inessential Shakespeare**

**Leader: Sarah Neville, Ohio**

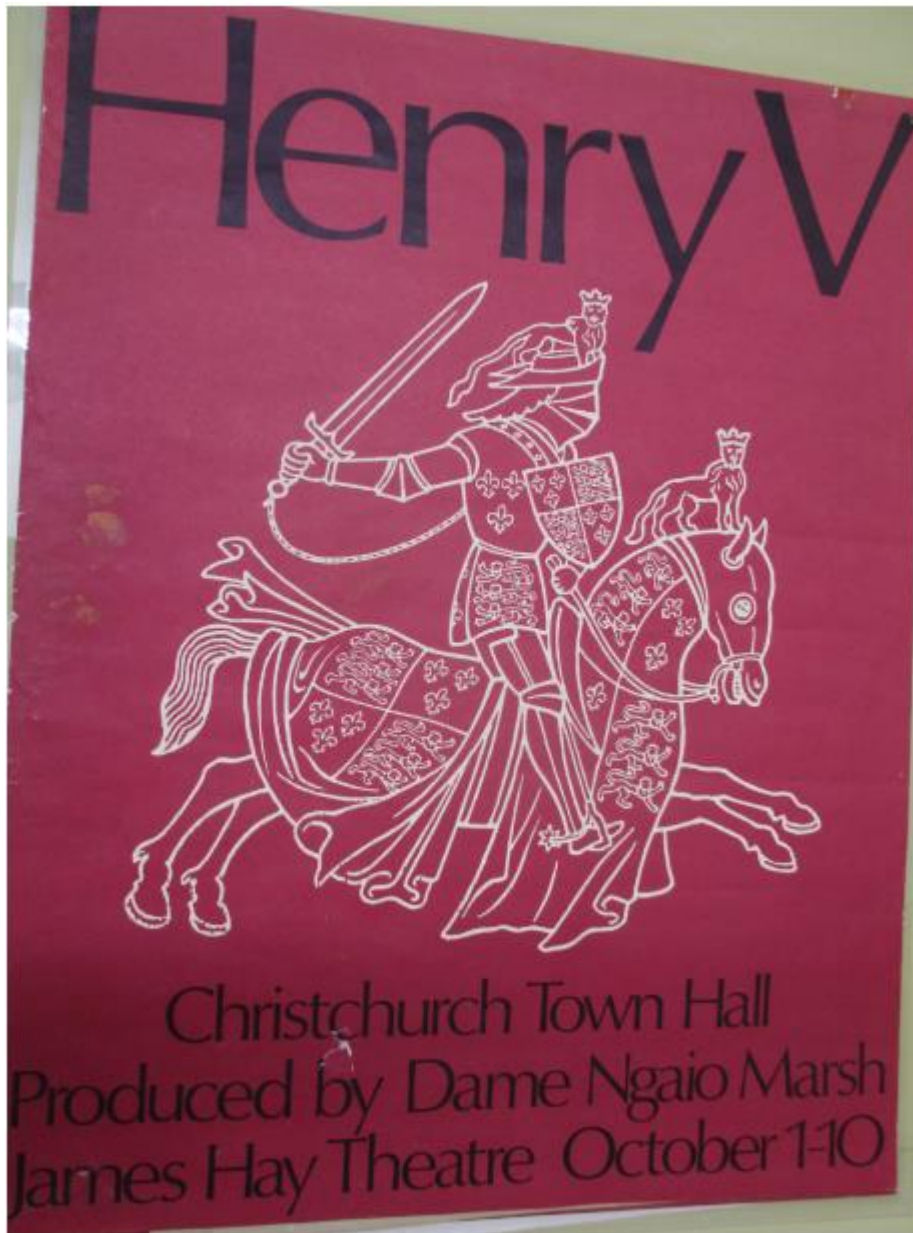
**Seminar: New Approaches  
to *Henry V***

**Leaders: Emma K. Atwood, University**  
**of Montevallo and Jennifer Feather,**  
**University of North Carolina, Greensboro**  
Meghan C. Andrews, *Lycoming College*  
Yan Brailowsky, *Université Paris Nanterre*  
Natalie K. Eschenbaum, *University*  
*of Wisconsin, La Crosse*  
Andrew J. Fleck, *University of Texas, El Paso*  
Michael D. Friedman, *University of Scranton*  
Mark Houlahan, *University of Waikato*  
Eric M. Johnson, *Folger Shakespeare Library*  
Fayaz Kabani, *Allen University*  
Catherine S. Lisak, *Université*  
*Bordeaux Montaigne*  
James N. Loehlin, *University of Texas, Austin*  
Andrew D. McCarthy, *University of*  
*Tennessee, Chattanooga*  
Linda McJannet, *Bentley University*  
Kate E. Myers, *University of Oregon*  
Joseph M. Sullivan, *Marietta College*

*Theatre/Nation/NZ*

Mark Houlahan University of Waikato

Paper for: SAA 2021: *Henry V* Seminar



*Marsh Henry V 1972 Poster.* Image Mark Houlahan

Some time after 7.30pm on Sunday, October 1, 1972, the opening production in the James Hay Theatre (the smaller 1308 seat theatre within the new Christchurch

town hall complex) began<sup>1</sup>. On a rampart raised high, silhouetted in blue light on the cyclorama draping the rear wall of the theatre, could be seen a familiar figure, orating the opening of *Henry V*: “Oh for a muse of fire...” Many in that first sold-out audience would have known that the Chorus was being played by Jonathan Elsom, a local actor who had been working for over a decade as a professional performer in London. Dame Ngaio Marsh<sup>2</sup>, the show’s director, had carefully guarded the secret that Elsom would appear to be Shakespeare himself, garbed in the clothing seen in the famous Droeshout engraving, and with the unmistakably iconic receding hairline, moustache and goatee with a stiffened Jacobean style ruff collar below. In her programme note Marsh entertained the charming (though never quite confirmable) conceit that Shakespeare himself may have played this part: “In the character of Chorus, Shakespeare himself speaks to us. He was an actor member of his company and may even have been cast for this role” (Marsh, qtd McNaughton). Elsom’s performance was greeted with acclaim, “a masterpiece of elegance, clarity and style” (Mason 13), his verse-speaking skills burnished after his years on the London stage. Howard McNaughton also praised Elsom, but noted an irony separating him from the rest of the cast: “Mr Elsom gives a superb performance,, the polish of which is seen to best advantage in isolation, where it does not draw comparison with the rest of the cast”, where, presumably, the comparison would have been invidious. His performance then assured the evening began, and ended ,with panache.

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<sup>1</sup> For several minutes the safety curtain refused to open. The theatre is a companion to the larger Concert Hall. Both halls were extensively damaged in the February, 2011 earthquakes in Christchurch and have been restored and recently reopened (see Lochhead).

<sup>2</sup> New Zealand uses a modified version of the English honours system, so this was an actual title, conferred some years earlier. Dame is the equivalent of a knighthood.



*Elsom as Chorus Opening Tableau*<sup>3</sup> Image: Mark Houlahan

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<sup>3</sup> The image is of a blurry photo in the Marsh papers. It must have been taken in performance. I have included it to give the general idea of the initial impact.





*Elsom as Shakespeare/Chorus* October 1972. Image Mark Houlahan

Initially the plan was to open with Tyrone Guthrie's celebrated production of *Everyman* but this could not travel to New Zealand. In March, 1972 Marsh had agreed to mount a Shakespeare instead. She was the obvious choice of director/producer, as, since 1943, her regular productions of Shakespeare plays had become famous. Her company travelled to Wellington and Auckland and to Sydney, setting a post-war benchmark in New Zealand for Shakespearean theatre. Marsh was also of course notable as one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century "Queens of Crime", alongside Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers, expert since the early 1930s in the classical form of the English "whodunnit", what Marsh fondly described as her "teccery". Many of Marsh's detective stories use a Shakespeare frame, such as *Hand in Glove* (1962), where a murder is committed to acquire a calfskin glove bought, purportedly, for

Shakespeare's son Hamnet. *Vintage Murder* (1937) traces the misadventures of a travelling Shakespeare company in the North Island of New Zealand, and the very last Marsh novel, published after her death, *Light Thickens* (1982) features the murder on stage of one of the actors in a production of *Macbeth*. The income from her detective novels allowed Marsh to travel to England frequently, taking in the highlights of post-World War II English theatre, the generation of Olivier and Gielgud, and when the Old Vic Theatre Company toured New Zealand in the late 1940s, Marsh entertained Olivier and his then wife, Vivien Leigh. Marsh's success as an author also allowed her the considerable time she devoted to her Shakespeare productions, beginning with the 1943 production of *Hamlet*, the performance script of which Polly Hoskins has so lovingly published.

There are two reasons for framing the '72 *Henry V* as the pivot of this paper. Firstly there is no doubt that Marsh's 30 years of Shakespeare established a crucial mid-century bench mark for sophisticated, fully achieved Shakespeares in New Zealand, a key point in the ongoing history of the reception/adaptation of Shakespeare to New Zealand conditions. Secondly these productions are very well documented, as Marsh took care to progressively lodge her papers during her lifetime with the Alexander Turnbull Library (the archive and manuscript division of the National Library of New Zealand). For the *Henry* show the archive includes the stage managers promptbook, production stills, posters, reviews, and correspondence. Then too there is a wealth of ancillary material illustrating Marsh's strategies for directing Shakespeare. Most of these materials are undigitized and Hoskins' edition of the *Hamlet* notwithstanding, the many promptbooks for Marsh's productions remain an underutilised resource for theatre histories of New Zealand.

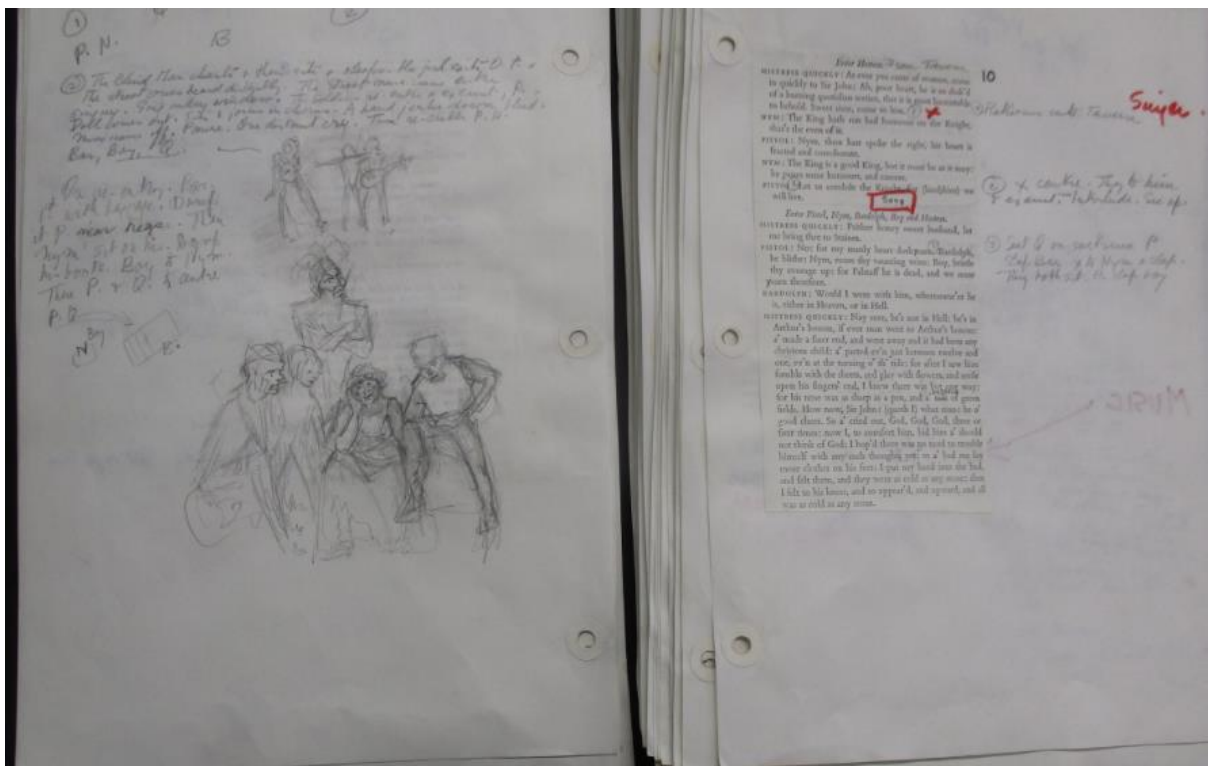
Once Elsom launched the evening , “the play marched along briskly and urgently” characterised by “that despatch and swiftness of attack that ... always marked [Marsh’s] work” (Mason 13). The cast of over 100 was the largest Marsh had ever directed, and they were impressively well drilled in a fashion Marsh had crafted over thirty years of directing student and community actors. The producer’s script for the production shows some of the means by which this was achieved. There are prompt books or production scripts for eleven of Marsh’s Shakespeares, and they share many common features. The *Henry V* script must originally have been kept in a ring binder (the punch holes are clearly visible). Each two-page opening makes an A3 or Folio size space. The script has been taken from a broken up copy of the Pelican Shakespeare, pasted onto the right side of the leaf. Cuts are physically marked with a strike through on the pages. These were quite extensive, and mirror the cuts marked in a script for an earlier production of the play in 1957, a script of which is also in the archive. Marsh was keen never to wear out her audience, so always cut vigorously.<sup>4</sup> In her archive is a list of Shakespeare plays, noting the number of lines in each and the number Marsh felt she would need to trim to achieve a performance time of two hours and thirty minutes. In the case of *Henry V* this required the omission of just over a third of the play in performance.

To the right of the play text are performance notes, especially cues for sound and entries. At the top of 1.1, for example, are the notes in red: “Dry Ice Discover. Chorus by Cyck [sic] as Chorus moves forward”, appearing as it were out of “the blue mists (of time)”, as Mason put it, the impressive volume of blue tinged smoke being admired by all who commented on the play.

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<sup>4</sup> “Coaches at 10.30” was her maxim, that being the time when she knew her audience would want to head home.

The left side of each opening is crowded with arresting detail. Here are quick vivid sketches of stage groupings, often accompanied by meticulous numbering of the phases of action within each scene. These are such a common feature of Marsh's promptbooks that I assume she herself must have sketched them. Her tendency was to block out each scene in advance of rehearsal; she had trained as a painter and always retained a strong visual sense, which is mark also of set pieces in her novels. The image below shows the layout for 2.3, with Mistress Quickly downstage centre, surrounded in tableau by Nym, boy, Pistol and Bardolph. The dynamism Mason noted then arose out of the choreographic skill with which the large cast moved from one location to the next.



Producer's Script Henry V 1972, 2.3. Image Mark Houlahan

The stage was no Brookian empty space. The James Hay stage is a modified proscenium with a thrust beyond the main curtain. This was an ideal space for the pictorialism which was such a notable feature of all the Marsh promptbooks. The eloquence of the chorus notwithstanding,



the audience did not need to rely entirely on its imaginary forces. For example, in the image below you can see the walls of Harfleur being finalised. The presence of the set building team at the base of the image gives a good sense of the size of this flat, and the effort it would take to lower this into place. Part of the point then was to exploit and so show off all the capacities of this new venue, rhyming through time with the 1599 speeches of the Chorus and, as well, Jaques' oration of praise to the Globe in that same season.



*Set for Walls of Harfleur.* Image Mark Houlahan

The image usefully indicates another constant in Marsh's productions. There are towns in New Zealand, built by European settlers, and very often these towns have an English-style church or Cathedral in the centre. But no New Zealand (or Australian) town has ever looked like this. Rather than transporting late medieval France to New Zealand, the aim here was clearly to transport New Zealanders back through the mists of time to the medieval, just as Olivier had done in the opening "storybook" sequences of his 1944 film. On October 4, 1972,

Mason wrote to Marsh, expanding the praise he had not been allowed space for in his published review: “one seemed many times not to be in a theatre at all but in the midst of some endless unfolding panorama of life and history”. Days after witnessing the premiere, he was still rapt in awe at “the heraldic ebb and flow of it, and the sense of space and distance.” Mason’s comments are evocative, in the fulsome style with which he often hailed in print anything he considered a significant cultural event. He also knew Marsh very well, closing this letter: “I revere you, and I love you.” Not everyone who saw the show was so awestruck.

That year Herbert Bogart, an American literary scholar, was visiting Canterbury University on a Fulbright Fellowship. As the academic year in New Zealand begins in early March (the southern autumn), he had been embedded in local culture for some months before taking in the show. The production clearly generated a great deal of palaver prior to first night; and Marsh had a long association with the University (see Hoskins), with a campus theatre being named after her in 1967. Bogart clearly knew of her reputation and, most likely, had been briefed by many people who knew Marsh or had acted in her productions as to what to expect. In the December issue of *Islands*, an avant-garde local literary magazine, Bogart had the chance to express his well-considered disappointment, framing the show in perspectives that the earliest reviews in magazines and newspapers could not manage. Bogart makes two main points against the show. First he says that, surely, Olivier’s great film shows Henry V in action so well, so evocatively summoning the famous arrows in flight at Agincourt, that any mere representation on stage is made redundant. Secondly, as a sympathetic outsider (he was clearly looking forward to this big event), he astutely places for us the tenor of the evening and the production style he saw:

I loved the audience which applauded almost on cue after the famous speeches and laughed at the modern implications of the lines. But finally what I witnessed was a safe cultural event guaranteed to offend no one, put on by a sincere, hard working

semi-amateurish company. I had hoped for a complex, thoughtful, artistic experience, professionally executed. ( Bogart 168)

He brings to the fore an anxiety implicit in some of Mason and McNaughton's comments, underneath their high praise: that the large company worked hard, worthy in itself, but not as effectively as you might hope. He accurately sets the level of the company, largely made up of volunteers. Most importantly he notes the paradox of this "significant" cultural event. On the one hand the production was part of the inaugurations for a world-class, cutting edge performance venue, and on the other the production style cast a backward glance. This was a summation of Marsh's directorial practice: articulate, fast-paced, with evocative, panoramic sets, with the space of the stage often laden with impressive tableaux. Yet, as with her detective novels, once she had established her directing protocols, Marsh did not really alter them.

If the production was, in a sense, in flight from New Zealand, that is of a piece with Marsh's career long ambivalence around being a New Zealander. She worked hard to sustain "high" culture in New Zealand, along European lines. She hated the New Zealand accent, which she considered flat and nasal, grotesquely unsuited to the rhetorical demands of a major Shakespearean text. She coaxed her actors out of their 'natural' voices, and gave public lectures on the subject.<sup>5</sup> Elsom was a perfect fit to play Marsh's Chorus, as he was steeped in English stage vocal stylings. So a distinction I would make is that this was a successful production of *Henry V* in New Zealand but that, by design there was nothing *of* contemporary New Zealand on stage. By 1972 New Zealand soldiers had for several years been supporting American troops in Vietnam and throughout the country violent protests had been staged against this support for a foreign war. An opportunity was clearly lost to register this in

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<sup>5</sup> In the recording of the lectures, her imitation of a New Zealand voice is very funny.

Shakespeare's most war-soaked play. Making such direct links from the Shakespeare text on stage to the world elsewhere outside the theatre was never Marsh's aim.

And yet: what would such a production feel like? A student show I saw in the year 2000 provides some early 21<sup>st</sup> century hints. This was directed at Auckland University by Sam Truebridge, now a professional director with a strong propensity for site specific performance events. Since 1963, the summer Shakespeare on the Auckland campus had often been set against a pastoral background of mature trees, beneath a neo-gothic clocktower from the 1930s. Truebridge used instead the landing bay at the back of the School of Architecture, a forbiddingly contemporary concreted edifice. The seating looked out at the dumpsters for the building's trash. From a caravan on site burst a demented looking, ranting dub poet, chanting the chorus's lines in a rocking, intense beat. The sound was deliberately distorted, as if the opening speech was so much Shakespeare yadda-yadda to be gotten out of the way. Here the kings of England and France were leaders of rival punk streets gangs. They drove large noisy cars, painted over with the union jack and the fleur de lys respectively. The dauphin's cheval was a large and beautiful motorcycle which the Dauphin constantly stroked for pleasure. The emphasis was on the violent assertion of nationalist claims. When Henry wooed Katherine, he pursued her through and over his large, swaggery car. At the point where he held her body prone over the bonnet, the King of France and his retinue returned to endorse the marriage and prevent a rape. Of course these production elements were derivative in some ways, and likely Truebridge was influenced by the wild energy of the Pennington/Bogdanov cycle of the history plays for the English Shakespeare Company, so grounded in the sour, narrow triumph of the English defeat of Argentina in the Falklands War in the early 1980s, and so alert to the paranoid inter-class and inter-racial conflicts within Britain that the Thatcher government so gleefully exploited. Like Bogdanov's, Truebridge's production was arresting,

violent and profane. It made you sit up and take notice, bringing familiar cadences to life. That's what I hope Shakespeare productions should always do. Like Bogart in '72, I pay my money (for as Feste says, "pleasure must be paid one time or another") and then count up the disappointments.

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