

T. S. ELIOT AS DRAMATIST

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T. S. ELIOT AS DRAMATIST

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by

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Brenda Loxier Boyte entitled "T. S. Eliot as Dramatist." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

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T. S. ELIOT AS DRAMATIST

I. Introduction

Throughout history one finds that men periodically appear who are destined to influence the course of events that follow them. In no area is this more true than in the field of literature, and of no man is this more true than of Thomas Stearns Eliot. While there are students of literature who do not like Eliot's abstruse style, few would gainsay the influence that this man of diverse talents has had and will continue to have on all subsequent writers.

Eliot's influence has been threefold; with some of the most profound and innovative poetry of the twentieth century, he has been a model for other writers. As a critic he has made no less an impression; perhaps not since Pope or Coleridge has anyone been quite so eloquent on the subjects of how poetry should be written and how it should be judged. He has also made important contributions in the field of drama.

When one thinks of T. S. Eliot, he usually thinks of his famous The Waste Land, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock, or Four Quartets. Indeed, these and others of his poems are the foundation on which his reputation

as a writer is built. Eliot, however, did not limit himself to lyric poetry. He recognized the importance of drama as a vehicle of man's adapting to his world and was inclined to create poetry which was essentially dramatic in nature. Northrop Frye said, "Perhaps The Wasteland. . . is closer to. . . poetic drama than any of his plays."¹

Eliot's interest in drama seems to date from his visits to the London Music Halls. Led by Arthur Symonds in 1890, sophisticated society sought this form of entertainment for the next three decades. As part of that society, Eliot became engrossed with the rapport that existed between the artists and the audience during performances. He became convinced that the audience should be a collaborator in any art, but especially dramatic art; he first presented this view in an obituary for Marie Lloyd in the Criterion when the famous music hall star died in 1922. The idea that the audience should be "involved with" the drama was not new with Eliot. An American poet, Vachel Lindsay, had already created a series of poems which contained elements to which the audience made responses. Eliot disagreed with Yeats's doctrine of "drama for the select few." He advocated that if drama was to fulfill its function of speaking to the masses of people, then the audience must feel more closely drawn into the dramatic experience.²

His experience at the music halls had convinced him that for the audience to respond to drama, certain elements must be present. The most important of these, he decided, was rhythm. It was the one common element to be found in the music and dancing of the music halls as well as in the poetry and ritualistic dance of the Greek chorus during the early history of drama. The rhythms, he seemed to suggest, correspond to latent feelings in man and touch nerves which help him to perceive the eternal truths. In Eliot's view the best way to bring these rhythms to modern drama was through poetry.³ Yet, the poetry must be such that the language would not be so elevated or so dialectical as to get in the way of clarity of thought or to grate on the sensibilities of the audience. He felt that it was necessary to express the truth about man's essential dignity and his relationship to God in a medium men could relate to. Poetry in drama, and the effect of one on the other became one of Eliot's major concerns. Perhaps one of the interlocutors in his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" presents the author's view best when he says, "All poetry tends toward drama, and all drama towards poetry."⁴ The nineteenth century's obsession with realism had driven poetry from the theater. Eliot regretted the loss of an element which he considered fundamental to drama. It became his

goal to write a poetic drama which would be relative to, and appreciated by, the audience of his time.

Much of the difficulty other writers had in attempting to write poetic drama, he felt, was the inability to get past the examples set by Shakespeare. He felt that to produce a poetic language which would be "tolerated" by a modern audience and which would still produce good poetry, the writer should go back past the Elizabethans and utilize a simpler style, one which would resemble medieval alliterative verse.⁵

In his plays Eliot not only returns to the medieval period to borrow rhythmical patterns, but he also returns to the Greeks and utilizes many of the elements which Aristotle says are necessary for tragedy. This is not to say that Eliot has written tragedies, for classification of his plays into established categories seems difficult. To say that he has used, among other things, elements of the Greek tragedy to produce a modern poetic drama which would be palatable to an audience unaccustomed to poetry in the theater and to do this without sacrificing the quality of the poetry would be more to the point. To delineate the most important of the elements he borrowed from the Greeks and to discuss the degree to which the critics think that he was successful in his attempts to write modern poetic drama will be the subject of this paper. Those plays which are often referred to as comedies

with a tragic view of life, Murder in the Cathedral,
The Family Reunion, and The Cocktail Party, will be
the basis for the study.

II. Eliot's Use of the Characteristics of Greek Tragedy

Thomas Becket, the martyr of Canterbury, is the principal character of Murder in the Cathedral. His story is not only familiar but also dear to the hearts of the Canterbury audience for whom it was commissioned and originally performed. It was an inspired choice, for both the subject and theme are very appropriate for the high style and mood one associates with the poetic drama. He chose the Greek myths as subjects of the next two plays. In The Family Reunion Eliot recalled the myth that Aeschylus related in the Oresteia. Ten years later he used the story Alcestis, written by Euripedes, as the basis for The Cocktail Party. Both these myths deal with the theme of guilt, just as Murder in the Cathedral does. Apparently Eliot forgot that few members of the modern audience would be aware of the stories of Orestes and Alcestis, and much of the significance of these two plays was lost to them.

While they may not know the original Greek myths, the modern audience does know about the suffering one undergoes when he is burdened by feelings of guilt. This is one of the major themes in all of Eliot's tragedies, the suffering of man as he comes to terms with his own personal guilt as well as the universal guilt of all men. It is also a theme which pervades the

The choice of Becket as a subject to show a man who suffers guilt because he is tempted to "do the right thing for the wrong reason" is one the modern audience can identify with. Though Becket finally rejects these temptations, perhaps more easily than less exceptional men, he is tempted by the idea of achieving martyrdom. He suffers the agony of seeing himself doubting his own motivations, and he undergoes inner turmoil before he arrives at a point of realization that the act of martyrdom can be determined only by God. Recognizing this, he sublimates his will to the will of God's "eternal action, an eternal patience/to which all must consent that it may be willed. . ."⁶ The average man may not be subjected to temptations of the magnitude of Becket's, but he is often faced with situations in which he feels the need to submit to, or accept, God's role for him. Like Becket he finds it difficult to accept that he can not "turn the wheel" but must accept God's course of action. When he does not allow himself to obey the will of God, he undergoes pain and suffering.

The guilt of all mankind is expressed through the role of the chorus of Canterbury women who acknowledge and accept their share of the blame for Becket's death. They can only watch helplessly and suffer the guilt of knowing that it is for them that Christ suffered and

that Thomas is about to suffer. His suffering is theirs, and they suffer in this knowledge. By the end of the play, they have achieved recognition of their part in the eternal plan and accept it as they pray

We acknowledge our trespass, our
 weakness, our fault; We acknowledge
 That the sin of the world is upon our heads;
 that the blood of the Martyrs and the
 agony of the saints
 Is upon our heads.
 Lord, have mercy upon us.?

The Three Knights handle their guilt in a different manner. They represent most men who do not accept their part in the universal sin as they try to mitigate their guilt by displacing it, first on the state, then on Thomas himself, and finally on the audience whom they are addressing. The Second Knight tells the audience:

. . . But, if you have now arrived at a just subordination of the pretensions of the Church to the welfare of the State, remember that it is we who took the first step. We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve. We have served your interests; we merit your applause; and if there is any guilt whatever in the matter, you must share it with us.

Becket allays his guilt through recognition of his inability to achieve martyrdom and his acceptance of God's control over his destiny. The chorus finds expiation through accepting their share of the guilt for Christ's and Becket's deaths. Eliot allows the

audience to experience temptation and to have the opportunity to accept its share of the burden of guilt through the temptation by the Knights as they try to justify their actions.

In The Family Reunion, Harry Monchensey is suffering because he thinks he has drowned his wife. He is not certain that he actually pushed her from the ship, but he wished her dead. In a Christian world, the thought is just as much a sin as the commission of the act. The audience is never told whether he has committed murder since the truth is irrelevant to the feeling of guilt Harry must bear. Harry is able to accept his guilt and seek atonement for it only through understanding the true nature of the sin. When Agatha tells him the facts of his family curse, the desire of the husband to kill the wife, he can accept his guilt because he recognizes that it is an inheritance from his father. Like Becket he can not nullify his guilt because he is not responsible for it.

In The Cocktail Party the guilt is caused by adulterous love affairs. Each of the four characters of the illicit affairs comes to realize that his greater guilt comes in not facing the real world. The married couple, Edward and Lavinia, are strangers to each other, and neither of their lovers sees them or their relationships as they really are. Through consultation with a psychiatrist, Dr. Reilly, whose contribution to

their recognition of their conditions is similar to that of Agatha's, they are able to seek salvation from guilt. Eliot returns here to the motif of martyrdom since Celia's path to salvation is through sacrifice for humanity.

Eliot also returns to the Greek tragedy for his choice of a type of protagonist for his plays. The heroes of those early dramas were usually exceptional men who were inherently more good than evil. So it is with Becket and Harry. Becket has a high sense of dedication to a cause which places him above the general strata of man. His understanding of the nature of God and his own fallibility and impending martyrdom elevate him to a realm where the average man does not live. Harry has not dedicated himself to service on a high spiritual plane, but he does possess the instincts of a good man. He is seeking salvation from the terrible burden of guilt he bears. He is able to achieve spiritual salvation only after Agatha tells him of his father's desire to murder his wife (Harry's mother). He accepts his share of the guilt of the family curse but refuses to accept the role of depository of the family guilt his mother has tried to impose on him. He arrives at a level of spiritual maturity which allows him to begin expiation for his guilt.⁹

With each play he writes, Eliot seems to rely less

on the Greek characteristics and to have less distinction between the major and minor characters. This can be seen when one compares Murder in the Cathedral to The Cocktail Party where all the characters contribute significantly to the action with the exception of the two caterer's men and Dr. Reilly's receptionist. The two major characters, Edward and Lavinia's, actions significantly influence only each other and their former lovers. They tend to be influenced by the other characters of the play for a reverse of the pattern of the Greek tragedy.

Aristotle has said that this exceptional man who is the protagonist of the tragedy must be in a position to influence others. Eliot's protagonists are in such a position. Becket's martyrdom had an immense effect on all believers of his time as well as later ones. The chorus of the poor of Canterbury are filled with fear and dread as they suspect his return from exile in France. They do not wish him to disturb the routine of their daily lives which they describe as "living and partly living." It is through the chorus that the effect of Becket's martyrdom is best revealed, and the effect is profound. They, like Becket, come to realize that it is not his decision but God's. They also accept their part in his death and the guilt that accompanies it.

Harry Monchensey's position of influence has been

thrust upon him by the order of his birth. The role of the eldest son in the family is one which accords him influence within the family group. His absence from Wishwood has caused time to stop for his mother. Amy wants him to come back so life can begin again. Amy's sisters and brothers, robots who do not really live but only exist, want him to fit into these plans and refrain from any mention of the incident which is causing the agony within his soul. Like the Canterbury women, they want the "turning wheel" which brings suffering to be still. Mary and Agatha, who are more aware and admirable than other members of the family, influence the protagonist more than they are influenced by him as they help him to see the course he must take.

The protagonist of The Cocktail Party does not meet the qualifications of the exceptional man as clearly as the two previous ones. As the plays come closer to being realistic rather than ritualistic, the characters become more "ordinary." Yet Lavinia, and later Edward, do come to a recognition that their "living" is "hardly living" and they do seek an answer to their dilemma. Another character, Celia, is a return to the saint motif as she sacrifices her life for the poor and sick in a remote part of the world. These characters are exceptional to the extent that they are aware that only through recognition and suffering can

they really act and, therefore, live.

Made up of very unexceptional people, the chorus is probably the most important prop Eliot borrows from the Greek. Supposedly originating in the worship service to Dionysus, drama was composed of only the chorus in its infancy. Evolving through the ages, drama replaced the chorus with the individual speaker. By the time of Sophocles and Euripides the role of the chorus was primarily to comment on the actions of the other characters or give the audience helpful background information. Succeeding generations of dramatists dropped the chorus altogether.

In his efforts to write a modern poetic drama, Eliot reinstated the chorus, first in The Rock and later in other plays. Eliot proved to be successful in his attempts to write choral poetry. The choral odes are all that remain of The Rock. Northrop Frye has called them, "the only valuable part of the play."¹⁰ The chorus is an important element in Murder in the Cathedral but becomes less important in The Family Reunion. In The Cocktail Party the chorus has been reduced to one scene and has been eliminated entirely in the last two plays.¹¹

David Jones suggests that Eliot has not only restored the chorus to drama but in Murder in the Cathedral has actually enlarged it's function. The chorus not only performs the traditional role of mediator

between the common people and the action of the play, but it also serves as an extension of the church service which instructs the worshipper on the meaning of martyrdom.¹²

The choruses of Aeschylus and Sophocles have been discussed by Jones in his discussion of Eliot's plays. He says

The chorus for him (Aeschylus) is the principal means of transcending the limitations of drama. Sophocles transfers attention to the individual actor and makes the chorus subordinate to him . . . the choral odes in Sophocles suspend the action; they are supplementary to it rather than complementary, as in Aeschylus.¹³

He sees Eliot's chorus in Murder in the Cathedral as being more closely patterned after those of Aeschylus than those of Sophocles. The poor women of Canterbury typify all mankind and represent the great mass of sinners who Christ was sent to save.¹⁴ Since Thomas' death and martyrdom parallels the sacrifice of Christ, he is dying to remind the chorus that they may be saved because of Christ's death. Their role is to witness his suffering and to acknowledge that their part of the action is to accept his suffering as well as Christ's sacrifice. By accepting his gift, they are completing the action, not merely commenting on it. Without their presence to acknowledge their guilt and his sacrifice, Becket's death would not have meaning. Their suffering reflects his suffering; their

acceptance of his martyrdom presents the other half of a whole. They are an integral part of the action of the play, not merely an adornment to it. The chorus embody their own experience rather than the author's view of the action.¹⁵ It is this involvement of the chorus which Jones refers when he sees the choruses of Murder in the Cathedral and The Family Reunion more akin to those of Aeschylus than those of Sophocles or Euripides.

In The Family Reunion the chorus is relegated to a position of less importance. Eliot does not stop his experimentation with the form, however. Here he utilizes both a traditional chorus as represented by the quartet of aunts and uncles and an auxiliary chorus in the person of Agatha. Traditionally, the chorus is to represent the common man who would have been uneducated and somewhat obtuse.¹⁶ Whatever information or ideas this chorus would contribute would be based more on intuitive or instinctive feelings rather than intellectual analysis. The traditional chorus often expresses fear of events to come and tries to resist any change that suggests action. Agatha, as the enlightened chorus, serves the same purpose as a chorus but presents an educated view. Her knowledge of family history and perception of life and human nature (and perhaps her love) are necessary for Harry to be able to resolve the conflicts he feels. Since she is necessary to the action of the play, Agatha's chorus is

similar to the chorus in Murder in the Cathedral; the chorus of aunts and uncles more closely parallels the traditional one.

The chorus makes another significant contribution to the play in addition to their involvement in the action. The pure beauty of their poetry is exceptional. Jones says of the chorus of Murder in the Cathedral:

The choruses were the fruit of previous experimentation in The Rock. They are perhaps the greatest thing in a great play. There is nothing else like them in English, to my knowledge. In fact we have to go back to Greek tragedy. . .¹⁷

Eliot almost eliminated the role of the chorus when he wrote The Cocktail Party in 1949. It is relegated to one short scene where Dr. Reilly, Julia and Alex chant an invocation to "the holy ones" to watch over Edward, Lavinia and Celia as they search for their path to salvation. The role is an adornment to the play and makes no contribution to the action.

By the time of his last two plays, Eliot had become more concerned with reaching a wider audience, and he had completely dropped most of the trappings of the Greek theater, deciding that these elements of the classic tradition and religious subject matter turned modern audiences away.

The reader of Eliot's plays sees a radical change from the time of his first attempt at writing drama for

the theater, Sweeney Agonistes (unfinished), to the time of The Elder Statesman. The three plays which have been discussed show those changes in a succinct way. Jones describes the evolution of these plays well. He says that they started as a study of how the martyrdom of the spiritually elect enriches the lives of the ordinary man. The emphasis gradually shifted from the elite individual who was concerned with standards of moral honesty and spiritual integrity to the group of common men who share those same concerns.¹⁸ The focus of the plays moves from the individual to the group; however, the group becomes more individual. By the time Eliot wrote The Cocktail Party the chorus no longer spoke for the common man. He spoke for himself as an individual who shares common problems and concerns with the group. In each play a separate theme is illuminated against a darker ground of the others. The total of the plays shows the whole picture while each play represents a separate part of the collage.

III. An Evaluation of Eliot as Dramatist

To complete a study of Eliot as a dramatist, the reader must attempt to make an evaluation of how well the author succeeded in his purpose. Future generations will have the final word, but the critical opinion of the present will be helpful.

There is no consensus as to which is his greatest drama. There are basically two opinions on this issue. There is the group of critics who feel that Murder in the Cathedral is his greatest work; there are others who feel that the last two, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman are equally good and the best of the lot. Each group presents good and valid reasons for the views it holds.

Those who contend that Murder in the Cathedral is Eliot's most important work include Raymond Williams, who calls it 'Eliot's most assured dramatic success.'¹⁹ Sean Lucy agrees with this judgement that it will be the most successful of his plays but does qualify his statements and mention some flaws.

He says

In Murder in the Cathedral, despite its faulty action and its didactic element, Eliot had written what may come to be considered as one of the best English plays of the half-century--and he had written it in verse.²⁰

Another proponent of this play as being Eliot's most important dramatic achievement is David Jones.

He says that there is not any doubt that it is a great play and that it may be the greatest religious play. He says that it can be enjoyed by others not sharing Eliot's belief. He disagrees with Lucy's judgement that it is didactic. Chiari says that "it allows the central character and those who surround him to be themselves, and not the mouthpiece of the author."²¹

There is agreement among most critics, even those who find that most fault with the play as a whole, as to the aspect of the play which is most successful. With few exceptions they praise the musical quality, and the beautiful, rhythmic cadences of the chorus which so completely express the suffering of the poor of Canterbury. Howard Howarth has said

. . .but those (choruses) of Murder in the Cathedral are among Eliot's greatest poetry, conducting the listener through the most tense and solemn of all dances of the nerves, gripping the listener with sudden pictures of English life, sudden sounds and cries from English life. And the English middle-class audience. . .respond to the voices which spoke to them of themselves and accepted Murder in the Cathedral as their play.²²

There is also a kind of consensus among those who find fault with Murder in the Cathedral. The flaw they mention most frequently is that it is too didactic. Others contend that it is written for a special audience, an audience that was bound to like the play because of its subject and setting and that their

critical judgement is subject to question. Still others find fault with the lack of unity of the play-citing the Christmas Day sermon and the speech to the audience by the Four Knights as too far removed from the rest of the play. Some fault the Knights' address to the audience as gimmickery and decry its use.

Chiari is representative of the group who contended that Eliot's last two plays are his most important contributions to poetic drama. He makes the distinction between "popularity" and "greatness." He concedes that Murder in the Cathedral is the only one of his plays which continues to be performed and to enjoy great success. He contends, however, that it is with the two comedies, The Confidential Clerk and The Elder Statesman, that Eliot came closest to writing important dramatic verse.²³

Chiari indicates the marked improvement in Eliot's plays began with The Cocktail Party. He points to the increased dramatic skills, the smooth blend of Greek myth and modern situation, and the fully integrated quality of the verse in this work as being signs of the progress of Eliot's dramatic skills. He says that in The Confidential Clerk Eliot completed the search for the perfect blend of dramatic form with character and action. Of the final play, The Elder Statesman, he says that the most marked characterizations are added to the same good quality already found in The

Confidential Clerk. He comments on its "atmosphere of graceful mellowness" which he feels reflects the long delayed personal happiness of Eliot.²⁴

Since Eliot is primarily known for poetry other than that which was meant to be performed, it seems natural to evaluate his success as a dramatist against that standard. Here the opinion is not divided. While most critics will compare one or more of Eliot's plays favorably with other plays of his time, research finds none who will suggest that the quality of his plays approaches the level of his other poetry. Yet few will make a definite statement to that effect (perhaps realizing that a shift in opinion and taste in the future may make it prudent to be vague). One critic who does express what the majority seem to feel is Sean Lucy. In T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition he concludes with the following evaluation:

It is almost impossible to avoid the idea that Eliot the poet is much more important than Eliot the dramatist. So far he has written no great play, and no play except Murder in the Cathedral which approaches greatness.²⁵

A true evaluation of Eliot's success or lack of it should be made in terms of what he was attempting to do. He wanted to write a play in verse which would be accepted by the modern audience. To do this he felt that he should imitate Shakespeare's technique. In an essay he contributed to the Dial, later reprinted in

The Sacred Wood, Eliot suggested of unsuccessful attempts to write poetic drama:

'Possibly the majority of attempts to confect a poetic drama have begun at the wrong end; they have aimed at the small public which wants "poetry". . .'

Shakespeare, he says, approaches from the other end. Eliot said Shakespeare wrote for a public who wanted entertainment of a crude sort but would "stand" a great deal of poetry.

Eliot approached his modern poetic drama in the same manner and met with some degree of success. Murder in the Cathedral was widely accepted and still is enjoying success. "In this and other plays he has helped give the theater a workable dramatic verse; [sic] and has probably done more than any other English playwright of this century to get audiences to accept this verse without prejudice. This is a major achievement. . ."26 There is little evidence to indicate that Eliot started a trend toward making the poetic drama a popular art form for today, but perhaps that is for the future to decide. Who can say where or when the influence of one writer will reemerge?

NOTES

¹Northrop Frye, T. S. Eliot (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1963), p. 41.

²Howard Howarth, Notes on Some Figures Behind T. S. Eliot (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), p. 300.

³Howarth, pp. 307-308.

⁴David E. Jones, The Plays of T. S. Eliot (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1965), p. 7.

⁵Frye, p. 38.

⁶T. S. Eliot, The Complete Plays of T. S. Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) p.50.

⁷Eliot, p.54.

⁸Eliot, p.50.

⁹Jones, p.96.

¹⁰Frye, p.40.

¹¹Frye, p.40.

¹²Jones, p.58-59.

¹³Jones, p.52.

¹⁴Jones, p.53.

¹⁵Jones, p.53.

¹⁶Jones, p. 104.

¹⁷Jones, p.56.

¹⁸Jones, p. 210-211.

¹⁹Raymond Williams, Drama From Ibsen to Eliot, p.227. quoted in T. S. Eliot and the Idea of Tradition, Sean Lucy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), p. 187.

²⁰Lucy, p. 190.

Joseph Chiari, T. S. Eliot: Poet and Dramatist
(New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 146.

²²Howarth, p. 317-18.

²³Chiari, p. 23.

²⁴Chiari, p. 142.

²⁵Lucy, p. 209.

²⁶Howarth, p. 301-02.

²⁷Lucy, p. 209.

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