

T.S. ELIOT'S PLAYS and RECEPTION

Eliot's plays, which begin with *Sweeney Agonistes* (published 1926; first performed in 1934) and end with *The Elder Statesman* (first performed 1958; published 1959), are, with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral* (published and performed 1935), inferior to the lyric and meditative poetry.

Eliot's belief that even secular drama attracts people who unconsciously seek a religion led him to put drama above all other forms of poetry. All his plays are in a blank verse of his own invention, in which the metrical effect is not apprehended apart from the sense; thus he brought "poetic drama" back to the popular stage. *The Family Reunion* (1939) and *Murder in the Cathedral* are Christian tragedies—the former a tragedy of revenge, the latter of the sin of pride. *Murder in the Cathedral* is a modern miracle play on the martyrdom of Thomas Becket. The most striking feature of this, his most successful play, is the use of a chorus in the traditional Greek manner to make apprehensible to common humanity the meaning of the heroic action. *The Family Reunion* (1939) was less popular. It contains scenes of great poignancy and some of the finest dramatic verse since the Elizabethans, but the public found this translation of the story of Orestes into a modern domestic drama baffling and was uneasy at the mixture of psychological realism, mythical apparitions at a drawing-room window, and a comic chorus of uncles and aunts.

After World War II, Eliot returned to writing plays with *The Cocktail Party* in 1949, *The Confidential Clerk* in 1953, and *The Elder Statesman* in 1958. These plays are comedies in which the plots are derived from Greek drama. In them, Eliot accepted current theatrical conventions at their most conventional, subduing his style to a conversational level and eschewing the lyrical passages that gave beauty to his earlier plays. Only *The Cocktail Party*, which is based upon the *Alcestis* of Euripides, achieved a popular success. In spite of their obvious theatrical defects and a failure to engage the sympathies of the audience for the characters, these plays succeed in handling moral and religious issues of some complexity while entertaining the audience with farcical plots and some shrewd social satire.

Eliot's career as editor was ancillary to his main interests, but his quarterly review, *The Criterion* (1922–39), was the most distinguished international critical journal of the period. He was a "director," or working editor, of the publishing firm of Faber & Faber Ltd. from the early 1920s until his death and as such was a generous and discriminating patron of young poets.

Eliot rigorously kept his private life in the background. In 1915 he married Vivien Haigh-Wood. After 1933 she was mentally ill, and they lived apart; she died in 1947. In January 1957 he married Valerie Fletcher, with whom he lived happily until his death and who became his literary executor. She was responsible for releasing a range of editions of Eliot's work and letters, and she also approved Andrew Lloyd Webber's adaptation of Eliot's light verse from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939) into the musical *Cats* (1981).

From the 1920s onward, Eliot's influence as a poet and as a critic—in both Great Britain and the United States—was immense, not least among those establishing the study of English literature as an autonomous academic discipline. He also had his detractors, ranging from avant-garde American poets who believed that he had abandoned the attempt to write about contemporary America to traditional English poets who maintained that he had broken the links between poetry and a large popular audience.

During his lifetime, however, his work was the subject of much sympathetic exegesis. Since his death (and coinciding with a wider challenge to the academic study of English literature that his critical precepts did much to establish), interpreters have been markedly more critical, focusing on his complex relationship to his American origins, his elitist cultural and social views, and his exclusivist notions of tradition and of race. Nevertheless, Eliot was unequalled by any other 20th-century poet in the ways in which he commanded the attention of his audience.