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DEADLINE: May 1st of each year
T. S. Eliot as Medieval Modernist: Period and Ideology in "Religious Drama: Mediaeval and Modern"

by

Charles Joseph Del Dotto

It is well known that T. S. Eliot's writings on early modern literature and drama had a profound influence on early modern studies, an influence not lost on contemporary early modernists interested in the genealogy of the field's current situation. Indeed, Eliot hoped that the study and critical reception of early modern verse drama would shape the production of modernist verse drama. In the 1924 essay "Four Elizabethan Dramatists," Eliot calls for the study of Elizabethan drama to have a "revolutionary influence on the future of drama." Yet, in his later writings as a verse dramatist, Eliot always keeps an arm's length between himself and the early modern dramatic poets, especially Shakespeare, whom he saw as his strongest precursors in the development of a modernist English verse drama. In the 1951 piece "Poetry and Drama," on the matter of verse style in his own first major poetic drama, Murder in the Cathedral, Eliot writes, "As for the versification, I was only aware at this stage that the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare.... Therefore what I kept in mind was the versification of Everyman." Elsewhere, he is keenly aware of the challenges of writing verse drama for a modernist theatre: "The difficulty of the author is also the difficulty of the audience. Both have to be trained; both need to be conscious of many things which neither an Elizabethan dramatist, nor an Elizabethan audience, had any need to know." Eliot finds his whip for training his

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1 Richard Halpern, for example, begins his study of Shakespeare and modernism by rehearsing the conventional narrative of Eliot's influence, and its decline, as fable: "Once upon a time, modernists roamed the earth. They were large, lumbering creatures compared with the smaller, quicker species that dominate today. The fiercest and most awesome of the modernists, T. S. Eliot, exerted a far-reaching influence on the whole field of literary studies, and not least on the field of Renaissance criticism." Shakespeare Among the Moderns. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1997) p. 1.


4 Introduction, Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition, by S. L. Bethell (London: P. S. King and Staples, 1944) p. 9. As excellent as his piece on Eliot's construction of his poetic audience is, one wishes Leonard Diepeveen had broached the subject of Eliot's construction of his later theatrical audience and the matter of what is at
audience and himself, as dramatist, less in the examples Shakespeare and his contemporaries provide than in the works their medieval predecessors left behind. This essay examines Eliot's status as a medieval modernist. The periodicity of Eliot's Middle Ages, problematic as it is, represents the convergence of his animus against modernity and liberalism with his desire for a religiosity that is not marginal, fragmented, and "compartmentalized" but rather central to the activity of everyday life in a culture and society best characterized by the words unity, integration, and order—the ideological language of conservatism.

In part, the concept of Eliot as "medieval modernist" is indebted to Michael T. Saler's work on visual modernism, the English avant-garde, and the London Underground transport system. What Saler describes in terms of medieval modernism is very much a stance or attitude towards the relationship between aesthetic production (imagination) and the utility of consumption (reception) grounded in a social functionalism thought to have its origins in the medieval. I should be quick to point out that Saler is rather ambivalent on the point with regard to Eliot himself: "While T. S. Eliot might be called a medieval modernist because of his admiration for the organic and spiritual community of the Middle Ages together with his "impersonal" conception of art, his elitist and formalist views isolate him from several of the central terms of the tradition as I have defined it." In part, the concept of Eliot as "medieval modernist" is indebted to Michael T. Saler's work on visual modernism, the English avant-garde, and the London Underground transport system. What Saler describes in terms of medieval modernism is very much a stance or attitude towards the relationship between aesthetic production (imagination) and the utility of consumption (reception) grounded in a social functionalism thought to have its origins in the medieval. I should be quick to point out that Saler is rather ambivalent on the point with regard to Eliot himself: "While T. S. Eliot might be called a medieval modernist because of his admiration for the organic and spiritual community of the Middle Ages together with his "impersonal" conception of art, his elitist and formalist views isolate him from several of the central terms of the tradition as I have defined it." It must be noted that while much of Eliot's early, pre-1927 (which is to say, pre-conversion) poetry and literary criticism leans in the direction of a formalism that stands opposed to the social functionalism of Saler's medieval modernism, a functionalism concerned with the moral, spiritual, and commercial economies of the land, Eliot's theatrical work—work that is a priori social, public, and above all collaborative and communitarian—and the literary-critical work that emerges out of Eliot's experience as a man of the theatre necessarily point to a modernist deeply concerned with the social, cultural,

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6 Randy Malamud reads Eliot's drama in terms of "a community of drama": "This is a community that is defined through drama; the dramaturgy itself is the first sign of community and is at the same time an analogical model for an extradramatic fulfillment of community (for which the drama at hand offers incentive, inspiration, and guidance)." Where the Words Are Valid: T. S. Eliot's Communities of Drama (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994) p. 58.
and spiritual utility of his imaginative production—in other words, a medieval modernist, by Saler's own criteria.

Eliot's ambivalence towards the early modern and repeated turns to the medieval evidence a contradiction between Eliot's life-long desire for a clearly articulated unity, integration, and order in all aspects of everyday life, including writing and religion, and his fetishization of an early modern period he imagines in terms of anarchy, disorder, and decay. Eliot repeatedly mystifies the early modern period. In his introduction to G. Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*, Eliot gives voice to a vision of the early modern past as a period of phantasmagoric peril, uncertainty, even unknowability: "But with Shakespeare, we seem to be moving in an air of Cimmerian darkness. The conditions of his life, the conditions under which dramatic art was then possible, seem even more remote from us than those of Dante." 7 In the essay "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Eliot discusses the line of English poetry that ran from Donne, Herbert, and Marvell to Milton and Dryden which, for Eliot, was the great English literary achievement succeeding from the playwrights of Shakespeare's time: "The poets of the seventeenth century" were, for Eliot, very much "the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth" and both alike "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience." 8 In "Four Elizabethan Dramatists" Eliot argues there is a "philosophical basis" for this devouring insatiability: "Even the philosophical basis, the general attitude towards life of the Elizabethans, is one of anarchism, of dissolution, of decay. It is in fact exactly parallel and indeed one and the same thing with their artistic greediness, their desire for every sort of effect together, their unwillingness to accept any limitation and abide by it." 9

It is an interesting irony in Eliot's literary historiography that in the latter part of the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century—in a period of restoration, of consolidation of

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9 "Four Elizabethan Dramatists." *op. cit.* p. 116. In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" of 1928, Eliot makes a statement very similar to that in "Four Elizabethan Dramatists": "So far as I can isolate Shakespeare, I prefer him to all other dramatists of every time. But I can not do that altogether; and I find the age of Shakespeare moved in a steady current, with back-eddies certainly, towards anarchy and chaos." *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) p. 54.
parliamentary (which is to say, democratic) power, of economic and mercantile development, of the emergence of a modern nation-state, and, most importantly, of returned domestic order after years of revolution and internal strife—there would be, as he famously asserts in "The Metaphysical Poets," the "dissociation of sensibility" afflicting the "mind of England," corrupting the poetic soul of the nation. Order, for Eliot, is the point of intersection between art and life; it is the ideal towards which they strive. "It is a function of all art to give us some perception of an order in life, by imposing an order upon it," Eliot tells us in "Poetry and Drama"; order characterizes Eliot's vision of the perfect poetic drama: "I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and musical order." Yet, Eliot's idealization of order fails to stand in harmonious order with (or to be ordered by) the heterogeneous, disordered, cacophonic reality of history. Eliot's tone with regard to art, drama, and order may nod towards a reluctant acknowledgement of the reality of disorder that characterizes, and has always characterized, history; however, such a nod paradoxically reinscribes the mystification of a past that, as the last two or three generations of historians and literary historicists have demonstrated, was profoundly structured and regulated, sometimes, in part, through the intervention of the stage itself. History is simultaneously replete with order and disorder. The


11 "Poetry and Drama" op. cit. p. 93. Eliot's use of the word "mirage" echoes a passage from the 1920 essay "The Possibility of Poetic Drama": "These poets [nineteenth century poets such as Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Tennyson, Browning] were certainly obliged to consume vast energy in their pursuit of form, which could never lead to a wholly satisfying result. There has only been one Dante; and, after all, Dante had the benefit of years of practice in forms employed and altered by numbers of contemporaries and predecessors; he did not waste the years of youth in metric invention; and when he came to the Commedia he knew how to pillage right and left. To have, given into one's hands, a crude form, capable of indefinite refinement, and to be the person to see the possibilities—Shakespeare was very fortunate. And it is perhaps the craving for some such donnée which draws us on toward the present mirage of poetic drama." The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1998) p. 35. Eliot's use of the trope of mirage in relation to verse drama of a Christian nature is appropriate, for the very possibility of theater is predicated on the material deployment in space and time of illusion for the construction of an alternative of/to reality. With Thomas' line "Humanity cannot bear very much reality" as the epigraph to his discussion of Eliot, Anthony S. Abbott considers Eliot's dramatic career in relation to the illusion-reality dialectic: "In a study of reality and illusion in modern drama, the place of T. S. Eliot is both central and unique, central because reality and illusion are major concerns of his plays and unique because he is the only major modern dramatist to treat the theme from a Christian perspective." For Abbot, "Eliot's plays from Murder in the Cathedral (1935) to The Elder Statesman (1958) form both a unity and a continuum. All five plays deal with the difference between the saint and the common man and the degree to which each is able to confront reality as Eliot perceives it. All five plays contrast reality as normally understood by human beings with reality as understood by the Christian." The Vital Lie: Reality and Illusion in Modern Drama (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1989) p. 100.
responsible historian recognizes this fact. What history is not, and this is a major problem in Eliot's conceptualization of early modernity, is a "Cimmerian darkness."\(^{12}\)

With regard to order and ideology, Eliot's periodization of the medieval, like his periodization of the early modern, is built on contradiction. Eliot's fetishization of the early modern bejies a desire for the period as a historical moment of creative subversive potential, a desire that flies in the face of his otherwise-rigid conservatism. His subversive desire for the early modern stands counterpoised against a nostalgia, grounded in the works of Victorian medievalists such as John Ruskin and William Morris, for a medieval period that Eliot imagines in terms antinomially opposed to those by which he understands the early modern, the same terms that underwrite his conservatism: unity, integration, and order. As with his "early modernism," the contradiction in Eliot's medievalism lies in the fact that such a nostalgia is shot through with the ideology of romanticism, a historical development rooted in revolution, individualism, anticlericalism, and antiauthoritarianism, political categories against which Eliot consistently fought throughout his life. As Louis Menand remarks, "Eliot identified the main stream of modern culture as romanticism, and he regarded romanticism as the secret friend and abetter of all the tendencies of modern life he most deplored: liberalism, secularism, laissez-faire."\(^{13}\) In his most telling critical engagement with the medieval, the 1937 essay "Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern," Eliot takes up the problem of writing verse drama that is

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12 The most egregious case of Eliot's early modern mystification pertains to the ever-troublesome category of subjectivity itself. In his essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca" (1927), Eliot, though not without a hint of ambivalence, practically gives birth to the Burckhardtian narrative of the early modern period as inaugural of modern subjectivity (hence, the designation "early modern"), a commonplace so taken for granted by many literary critics and theorists that academics, especially medievalists, are still correcting the ideational and factual assumptions that predicate this problematic narrative: "What influence the work of Seneca and Machiavelli and Montaigne seems to me to exert in common on that time, and most conspicuously through Shakespeare, is an influence toward a kind of self-consciousness that is new; the self-consciousness and self-dramatization of the Shakespearian hero, of whom Hamlet is only one. It seems to mark a stage, even if not a very agreeable one, in human history, or progress, or deterioration, or change." "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," Selected Essays (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) 139-140. As an example of the sort of corrective medievalists have to write in order to rein in the narrative of modern subjectivity Eliot propounds, see David Aers, "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the 'History of the Subject,'" Culture and History, 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing, ed. David Aers (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1992) pp. 177-202. The growing trend on the part of medievalists to identity their period as the "premodern" fascinates me. It remains to be examined.

Christian in substance and modern in form. Inasmuch as it is valuable for better understanding Eliot's dramaturgy, especially regarding *Murder in the Cathedral*, it is much more important for its highlighting the difficult and problematic relationship amongst the categories of religion, ideology, and history with regard to Eliot's medievalism.

He commences his essay, "When we speak of 'religious plays,' we inevitably have in mind *Everyman*, and the various cycles of plays, such as those of York, Beverley, Wakefield, Coventry and Chester, which flourished in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and lingered on through the time of the Tudors. These plays give us a kind of standard by which we measure anything that we write and produce now—however far we depart from the aims and methods of the older drama." Eliot is quick to point out yet qualify the extent to which late medieval English drama can function as a "standard" for new religious drama. He recognizes the legitimacy, even the necessity of secular drama, from the popular performance traditions of Marie Lloyd, the music hall, and Shaftesbury Avenue, on one end of the spectrum, to the high modernist dramatic art of Cocteau, Hofmannsthal, and Yeats, for example, on the other. However, secular drama needs to be integrated with religious drama to the extent that they are both ordered by a common attitude towards Christian principles and morality: "I do mean that we want, and must have, more than we seemed to want when we first started out to examine the future of specifically religious drama: we want the whole of serious drama to have a religious background and to be informed with religious principles."


18 "Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern" *op cit.* p. 11.
Eliot's idealization of order is concomitant with a philosophy of action and belief which holds those two categories as not merely parallel in the practice of everyday life but as integrated in a unified ontology. It is this impulse towards integration in our being with respect to our thoughts and deeds, our conviction and agency, which animates Eliot's literary criticism, social criticism, and dramaturgy. Theologically, it animates "Religious Drama," as well. There is a polemical thrust to the piece. Eliot stands firm against any structure, whether political, ideological, cultural, or dramatic, that would force or coerce human beings into becoming divided selves that have compartmentalized their deepest religious beliefs and their everyday lives: "What I am opposing is not merely a division of religious and secular drama into watertight compartments; what I am proposing is not merely that we need to go to a religious play or to a secular play in much the same spirit. It is an opposition to the compartmentalisation of life in general, to the sharp division between our religious and ordinary life." Eliot remarks that "in the world in which we live this compartmentalisation is constantly being forced upon us." It represents a threat not merely to some abstract and vaguely-defined dignity of the individual soul; its danger is tangible and imminent: "The terminus of such a doctrine is of course to put an end to man's private life altogether, for the division cannot be maintained." For Eliot the compartmentalization that would divide the subject would eventually effect the death of the subject.

Though Eliot's insistence of unity between inner religious being and outer social being is, according to Rowan Williams, in line with a tradition of high-church Anglican thought on the relationship between religious experience and everyday life, Eliot's paranoia (evident in his apocalyptic fear of "an end to man's private life altogether") and animus against modernity,


\[20\] Eliot had broached "compartmentalisation" two years earlier: "And if we, as readers, keep our religious and moral convictions in one compartment, and take our reading merely for entertainment, or on a higher plane, for aesthetic pleasure, I would point out that the author, whatever his conscious intentions in writing, in practice recognizes no such distinctions. The author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly, as human beings, whether he knows it or not; and we are affected by it, as human beings, whether we intend to be or not." "Religion and Literature," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) p. 394.

liberalism, and their entailments of pluralism and toleration for the non-Christian Other are peculiarly his own. Liberalism is the ideology that poses the greatest single challenge to the devout modern believer, Eliot would have it. "I am thinking also of the ways in which we have to adapt ourselves, every day, to the compromise of liberalism: to live among, and to maintaining common sympathy and common action (as indeed is duty as well as necessity) with, people who deny or ignore the fundamentals of Christianity. On the one hand we accept, and on the other we must never accept as a finality, this state of affairs." 22 There is a proto-fascist virulence to Eliot's casting of the non-Christian Other that is undoubtedly related to his insidious anti-Semitism (an anti-Semitism that, in its modern incarnation, also has its historical roots in the medieval); 23 it is not too far a leap from these sentences to the following now-infamous one from his 1933 Page-Barbour Lectures at the University of Virginia, *After Strange Gods*: "What is still more important [than cultural homogeneity] is unity of religious background; and reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (20). 24 Eliot Studies has been concerned with this nasty strain of Eliot's thought for some time now; it is not my intention to rehearse old arguments on the matter. 25 The important point is that Eliot's desire for order and integration of inner and outer life over and above a compartmentalization of action and belief, in short, his conservatism takes the form of a medievalism that offers an insular alternative, in Eliot's devotional imagination, to pluralism, liberalism and, by extension, a modernity Eliot had, elsewhere, repudiated. 26


26 In the 1928 essay "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," Eliot critiques his former teacher's analysis of modernity and his objection that the "moderns [...] have not been sufficiently modern," writing, "Those of us who lay no claim to being modern may not be involved in the objection, but, as bystanders, we may be allowed to inquire whither all this modernity and experimenting is going to lead." The tone is not one of bemusement as much as it is one of dread, and one can hear a quietly menacing apocalyptic undercurrent in the stream of Eliot's
Eliot's "Religious Drama" is burdened with a romantic nostalgia for a Middle Ages that, in contrast to the anarchism, dissolution, and decay of the Elizabethan period, was "simple" in its social, cultural, and ecclesiastical structures. Against liberalism, the compartmentalization of action and belief, and the binary of religious and secular drama, all of which he finds untenable, Eliot seeks "reintegration": "We need to strive towards a kind of reintegration of both kinds of drama, just as we need to strive towards a reintegration of life." 27 For Eliot, the work of reintegrating seemingly disparate aspects of drama and of the self does not take the form of a leveling, erasure, or "simplification" of difference: "When I say 'reintegration' I do not want to be taken to mean 'simplification.' We do not want to get back to the state of mind of the village or cathedral-town audience of the later Middle Ages, for whom the religious play provided everything simply because it was the only kind of play they had." 28 Yet, we must be wary of Eliot's disqualification of "simplification," for it is disingenuous. Underwriting Eliot's characterization of the work the medieval drama accomplishes vis à vis the adverb "simply" is the assumption that the drama works "simply" because the people and the period were simple—which is deeply problematic. Eliot might tell us that theirs is a "state of mind," a simple "state of mind," to which we do not wish to return, but does he believe it? As already discussed, he qualifies his statement that medieval drama is a "standard" according to which we must judge new theatrical work by asserting that, even where "their aims and methods" differ from medieval drama, both religious and secular modern drama should share an investment in Christian values and belief. Eliot also qualifies, with respect to this "standard," the extent to

words. "The Humanism of Irving Babbitt," *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951) p. 478. While Eliot's conservatism is frequently characterized (by myself, among others) in terms of fascism, he himself characterized liberalism as a potential precondition of fascism. In his reading of the temporality of liberalism in chapter one of Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (a book which was written only two years after "Religious Drama") Kenneth Asher argues, "Perceptively (and Eliot is often a telling critic of the liberal cause) he attacks liberalism for its lack of a telos. Because liberalism is a freedom from and not a freedom for, it is in grave danger of leading the democratic mass toward 'that which is its own negation: the artificial, mechanised, or brutalised control which is a desperate remedy for its chaos.' Thus, fascism and communism appear to Eliot as merely the logical extension of a rudderless, democratic materialism. It is with this in mind that he presents the reader with his concluding either/or: 'If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God) you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin.'" *T. S. Eliot and Ideology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1995) p. 88.

27 "Religious Drama: Mediæval and Modern" *op cit.* p. 13.

which the medieval and the simplicity of the people and the period might be problematic to modern audiences of religious drama. He writes,

The qualification is important. For this standard of the mediaeval plays may be applied in an undesirable way. We are apt to think of the Middle Ages as having been somehow specially favoured in the way of their mode of life, their religious stability, and their atmosphere of faith and devotion; and we start with a feeling of discouragement and timidity that is fatal to the production of anything new. I suspect that, for the most part, people still tend to regard the performance of a religious play as something to be attended, like a bazaar or a jumble sale, from a sense of duty rather than for the purpose of enjoyment.29

Eliot asserts the status of the medieval as "specially favoured"—divinely blessed and anointed, we hear in a tone that suggests a sharp, condemning contrast between the religious and social idyll of the Middle Ages and the fallen spiritual wasteland of liberal modernity wherein the attendance of a religious play is done more out of onerous "duty" than out of the soul's longing for a specific (and exalted) pleasure and "enjoyment."

While Eliot may be disturbed by our modern potential towards a fatalistic spiritual "discouragement and timidity," we should be disturbed by Eliot's utter disregard for historical fact. Apparently, Eliot's Middle Ages are a fantasyland devoid of grueling hardship and excruciating pain. Not everyone had to live in the mud, by the plow, killed by sword or plague; but many people did; many people were. The morality and the spirituality that remain oblivious to this pain, that do not acknowledge it, are suspect; as Stanley Cavell tells us, "A 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness. Spiritual emptiness is not a blank."30 Likewise in Eliot's Middle Ages

29 Ibid. p. 8.

there are not to be found heresy, heterodoxy, and religious and ecclesiastical instability—let alone individual doubt and crisis of faith. When reading Eliot and considering the periodicity of his Middle Ages, we must be careful not to allow Eliot's projection of an idyllic utopian Christian society and subjectivity onto the medieval to substitute for the historical reality as it was. The portrait of the Middle Ages we glimpse from Eliot's discussion of religious drama would be foreign not only to the historians and historicists who have painted, at the least, a much more complicated picture than Eliot's "specially favoured" idealization—it would be foreign to the people of the Middle Ages themselves.