

THE CAREER OF A DRAMATIST¹

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The Elder Statesman is a success within special limits. It is an extension of the model of its predecessors, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clerk*. Anyone familiar with those predecessors could have foretold what was to be seen on the boards at Edinburgh last year, could almost have read the text of the play before it was printed. One thinks of another sequence of four closely-related plays concluding with *The Tempest*.

To make such a comparison, even momentarily, is to pay vast tribute to the later poetic dramatist. But a comparison, momentary or studied, points this capital difference: the poetry of *Cymbeline* or *The Winter's Tale* yields more significance, and therefore more delight, at each re-reading; the verse of *The Confidential Clerk* or *The Elder Statesman* says nearly all it has to say, at a single hearing or reading—unlike the poetry of *The Waste Land*, or even of some of the speeches of the Chorus in *Murder in the Cathedral*, where the resources or reserves appear limitless. This difference in the quality of language has consequences for the theatre. The plays of Shakespeare are a challenge to the producer. Because of the suggestiveness of the poetry, they ask to be produced in all manner of modes, whereas one production of *The Elder Statesman* cannot—or should not—differ from another production, except in minor points of emphasis depending on the skill of players. A standard production is ensured less by the stage-directions than by a pallid fixity of language.

The Elder Statesman is depressing in that it follows the conventions—conventions which compel a thin language—of its immediate predecessors. But, in its themes and occupations, it is utterly consistent not merely with that section but with the whole of Mr Eliot's work in poetry—including, emphatically, the great non-dramatic poetry—and thought. Because of this consistency *The Elder Statesman* borrows a kind of greatness: the thin dialogue echoes faintly yet throughout with the powerful poetry he once wrote. Indeed, it might be argued that in writing thin lines which thus echo great poetry, Mr Eliot has, in *The Elder Statesman*, found a substitute for poetry, and that it is to this substitute that the pattern of movement of the characters is enacted. But for that *oeuvre*, that body of anterior work, *The Elder Statesman* might seem a poorish play. Yet among its audiences there must sit some, a few, wholly ignorant of Mr Eliot's previous work. What does

1 *The Elder Statesman, A Play*. By T. S. Eliot (Faber; 12s. 6d.).

this element of the audience see or hear that is more memorable than what they customarily see or hear in the West End?

Like the protagonists of *Murder in the Cathedral* and *The Family Reunion*, the Elder Statesman is troubled by ghosts from the past. It is the presence of these ghosts—uncomfortable memories, burdens on the conscience, unexpiated sins—that conduce in Lord Claverton a sense of emptiness, inadequacy or partial failure after a long career of political and public services. Now these ghosts have their 'objective correlatives' in the persons of those who were witnesses of those sins when they were committed. The first of these 'correlatives', Gomez, makes the first of his disturbing, yet eventually remedial, appearances even before Claverton enters Badgley Court as a guest or patient.

Badgley Court, which is
 'A convalescent home,
 With the atmosphere of an hotel,'

we take—with some well-known lines in *East Coker* in mind—as a figure, not for the world, but for an *ecclesia* within the world. Within the precincts of this *ecclesia*, Lord Claverton suffers the attentions of Gomez. Two others similarly remind him of what he once had been, of what once he had done. One of these is a woman whom long ago he had wooed and then repudiated. The other is his own son, Michael who, in his tendency to evade and renounce, comes to be seen by Claverton as an image of himself in his own youth.

There is a Peripety and Discovery. The hero arriving at the state of self-knowledge is ripe for a release in death. Blessing his daughter and future son-in-law, and forgiving his persecutors who were in fact, however mean or malicious their motives, actually instruments of his atonement, he goes to lie under the great beech tree. Like Oedipus, Claverton's destiny finds a perfect end. This action had been emergent in Mr Eliot's previous plays and is here completed.

A special point of interest in *The Elder Statesman* is a concern with names. All but two of the characters have renounced, or are anxious to renounce, their real names. Why? In renouncing or suppressing a name, they think they can renounce the original identity the name denoted. Thus 'Lord Claverton' conceals the plain Dick or Richard Ferry who wants to die forgotten until the 'tempters', 'blackmailers', or instruments of redemption (they are all these) force his showing-up; 'Gomez' conceals the early Culverwell; 'Mrs Carghill' conceals Maisie Batterson *alias* Mountjoy. Michael, with the same motive that had animated his father in his youth, wishes to change his surname, and so escape from himself. The Matron of the convalescent home—which itself must be known under some name which will disguise its real purpose (it succeeds in its purpose of healing, or making whole, in the

case of Claverton)—must be called by a name which conceals her office. Only Claverton's daughter, Monica, insists on being addressed by her genuine name for she alone is single or pure, in the sense of being an integer. Her fiancé, Charles Hemington, also has no *alias* as yet, as yet no identity to renounce—but he is following his future father-in-law into politics, we are told, and the time may come.

The Elder Statesman is an allegory as befits an author who is a student of Dante. In addition to its literal and anagogical meanings it has others. One level of the play invites speculation. Who, for instance, was the old man, proved later to have been dead already, whom young Dick Ferry, driving fast and with a couple of girls on the back seat, ran over? Was he perhaps the 'worn out poetical fashion', for whose death the writer of 'Prufrock' need really have felt no guilt, or taken no credit, since it was already dead? And what about his companion on that journey, Culverwell? Is he an eminent senior poet in another land? And has Maisie Mountjoy no relation to an essay on a celebrated star of the bygone music-hall, or to certain dramatic 'fragments' which are perhaps more dramatic than anything the author has since written? It is not difficult to find, in the world of letters, an analogue to Michael—one who renounces the source of his own being.

If *The Elder Statesman*, despite its achievement, leaves us with a sense of dissatisfaction, perhaps this dissatisfaction is best explained by Mr Robert Speaight in an article, 'Interpreting Becket and Other Parts', included in the Symposium for T. S. Eliot's seventieth birthday. He regrets that Mr Eliot, after *Murder in the Cathedral*, aimed at success in the commercial theatre of the West End, a theatre which demands of verse that it ruthlessly disguise itself as prose. It was a critical choice of Mr Eliot's. The language which it is possible for upper-middle class Englishmen to utter in the frame of a drawing-room is a thin and limited English. Working to other conventions, or creating them, imagining dramatic characters in an environment freer or less naturalistic than that of a typical West End stage set, and with other languages—or forms of English—at hand, with their resources awaiting exploration and exploitation, what might not have been achieved? But the question implies criticism not of simply one author, or of the whole West End theatre, but of a whole society.

REVIEWS

THE LIFE OF ST THOMAS AQUINAS. Biographical documents translated and edited with an introduction. By Kenelm Foster, O.P. (Longmans; 30s.)

The life of St Thomas Aquinas is known to us principally by three